

Air strikes on Somalia: A new stage in Washington's illegal "terror" war

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US air strikes against targets in the south of Somalia have claimed a substantial number of civilian lives. The bombing campaign, begun Sunday night and continued on Monday, mark a major escalation in the Bush administration's lawless use of violence to achieve Washington's strategic aims under the auspices of its "global war on terrorism."

The attacks mark the first direct US military intervention in Somalia since 1994, when President Clinton ordered US troops withdrawn following the "Blackhawk Down" episode that led to the deaths of 18 Army commandos during street fighting in Mogadishu. The recent attacks, part of an intensified attempt to establish American hegemony over the entire Horn of Africa, have heightened the threat that the conflict in Somalia will ignite a regional war with unforeseeable consequences.

The attacks on Hayi, 30 miles from Afmadow, and on a remote island 155 miles away, involved a US Air Force AC-130 gunship launched from a base in Djibouti. A Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) spokesman said, "So many dead people were lying in the area. We do not know who is who, but the raid was a success."

Yesterday, two helicopter gunships, described by a Somali official as American, attacked Afmadow, a town close to the Kenyan border, killing 31 civilians, including two newlyweds, according to witnesses.

Following the first attacks the president of the US-puppet interim administration, Abdullahi Yusuf, dutifully stated, "The US has a right to bombard terrorist suspects who attacked its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania." Washington alleges the targeted villages were sheltering Islamist fighters, including members of Al Qaeda.

Prior to these assaults, the US had already dispatched three warships to patrol the Somali coast and has also sent an aircraft carrier. The US air strike took place at the southernmost tip of Somalia, which is the scene of heavy fighting between Ethiopian forces and Islamist militias and is where the US has stationed its ships.

The direct US military intervention is in part a product of the Bush administration's inability to rely on various proxies it had hoped would be able to advance Washington's plans.

The US response to the driving out of its military from the capital Mogadishu in 1993 was first to turn to the UN in an effort to subjugate the country, then to back various warlords and finally to sponsor the creation of the TFG. However, this only fuelled anti-US sentiment and encouraged popular support for the Union of Islamic Courts.

The US-backed December 24 invasion of Somalia by up to 15,000 well-armed Ethiopian troops, backed by MIG jet fighters, appeared to easily sweep away the poorly-equipped Islamist militia. But having successfully ousted the UIC regime by using Ethiopia, Washington has nothing to replace it with that can stabilise the country. Instead, the conflict unleashed in Somalia together with Washington's plans to encourage other states to act as its military proxies threatens to destabilise the entire Horn of Africa.

As well as pitched battles in the south near the border with Kenya, street fighting has continued in Mogadishu and elsewhere—led by an alleged

3,500 militiamen but involving local workers and youth angered by the military presence of Somalia's long-time enemy. Somalia is overwhelmingly Muslim and has twice been at war with its much larger neighbour. Ethiopia, with its Christian ruling elite, is viewed as a puppet of the US.

Hundreds of people have taken to the streets of the capital, Mogadishu, in protests during which at least three civilians have been killed—forcing yet another delay in a planned campaign by the "transitional government" to seize the large quantities of arms held by the city's residents.

Numerous reports speak of the Islamist militants having avoided a direct conflict with Ethiopian troops, but still having the potential to wage a guerrilla campaign. Ted Dagne, a regional specialist at the Congressional Research Service, said, "It looks as if the Islamists have been defeated, but what they have done is gone underground." And a diplomatic source commented, "A lot of the militia more or less melted away. They're still present; they're still armed, and there's a real possibility that they could become an insurgency if a political settlement can't be devised."

In addition, the warlords previously backed by the US but suppressed by the UIC have seized their chance to reassert their presence in Mogadishu.

Ethiopia was happy to curry favour with Washington by acting on its behalf in bringing down the UIC. And it was well rewarded for doing so. *USA Today* has noted that Ethiopia, which has a population more than seven times greater than Somalia's, received nearly \$20 million in US military aid since late 2002. It cited Pentagon spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Joe Carpenter on the "close working relationship" with the US, including intelligence sharing, arms aid and training—with 100 US military personnel currently working in Ethiopia.

USA Today continued, "Advisers from the Guam National Guard have been training Ethiopians in basic infantry skills at two camps in Ethiopia, said Maj. Kelley Thibodeau, a spokeswoman for US forces in Djibouti."

US involvement in Ethiopia's occupation is coordinated from Djibouti, which serves as the US military training and operations centre for the Horn of Africa. The comparatively tiny state was formerly French Somaliland and, as its name suggests, is primarily ethnically Somali. It is bordered by Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia and has a large coastline on the strategically vital Red Sea and Gulf of Aden overlooking Yemen.

The US established an 1,800-strong Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa based at Camp Lemonier in 2002. It conducts "host nation anti-terrorism training" for various states, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Seychelles, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia.

However, the US can ill-afford to have its own troops deployed for a long period in Somalia. The US 5th fleet stated last month that a naval strike group sent to the Persian Gulf in order to threaten Iran would be available to help off the coast of Somalia. But should hostilities against Iran escalate, along with the deployment of thousands of additional troops to Iraq, this will leave US forces massively overextended.

The ships involved in the Somali operation belong to the Bahrain-based Combined Task Force 150, a multinational force that includes ships from

the US, Canada, France, Germany, Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Its remit included the waters of the Gulf of Oman, North Arabian Sea, parts of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea.

Washington cannot rely on the repressive Ethiopian regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi indefinitely. Ethiopia is loathe to mount a protracted policing operation. Zenawi has stated that he would like to withdraw his troops within a matter of weeks. Its population is split almost equally between Christians and Muslims, including many ethnic Somalis in the eastern desert region, the Ogaden, and the intervention faces substantial popular opposition at home.

But so far there is no concrete plan to replace them with an alternative force.

Somalia's puppet regime has no significant and stable military of its own. It claims to have a force of 10,000, but this is undoubtedly an exaggeration. The January 6 *Washington Post* reported on a meeting where Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi assembled a "revived Somali national army . . . in the sand-blown yard of the former parliament, a hollowed-out building splashed with grenade blasts and scrawled with apocalyptic graffiti.

"About 1,000 men sat in the sun, soldiers who had been inactive for 15 years, old men with graying beards wearing whatever shade of camouflage they found at the market or dug out of storage. Few had boots; most wore leather loafers, sandals or thin-soled tennis shoes. They squinted at the newly ascendant, who was swept into power last week on the strength of Ethiopian soldiers now pointing machine guns at the crowd.

"They all stood to sing the Somali national anthem, with many soldiers simply moving their lips, having forgotten the words. When it was over, 100 or so civilians heckled the new force—"Traitors!"—and Gedi zipped off in convoy. Even at such orchestrated events in Mogadishu, it is unclear who is in control, and the same could be said of Somalia itself."

The transitional government is reported to be seeking to buttress this force with around a thousand soldiers from the northern Somali regional autonomy of Puntland, the home region of interim President Abdullahi Yusuf, and by making alliances with various warlords—this is a recipe for disaster.

The Bush administration is attempting to overcome its difficulties by assembling a military force from various African states. In January 2005, the member states of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda and Somalia—proposed a military mission to Somalia. The UN encouraged this by partially lifting a 1992 arms embargo on Somalia—one that in fact was never really applied. Late last year the International Contact Group on Somalia, which includes the US, European Union and several African nations, proposed an 8,000-strong force be created to shore up the transitional government, then under siege by the Islamist militia. UN resolution 1725, adopted December 6, authorised the creation of such a regional force by IGAD and the African Union.

US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Frazer has announced that Washington will provide \$24 million in additional funding to support development and peacekeeping efforts in Somalia, of which at least \$10 million will go towards funding the proposed intervention force. This is in addition to the \$16.5 million pledged by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The EU has also pledged an extra €36 million (US\$47 million) in aid, on top of €15 million already set aside to finance an African peacekeeping force.

At an ICG meeting in Nairobi, Kenya on January 5, attended by the UN, US, EU, the African Union, Arab League and IGAD states, the nearest thing to a concrete pledge of troops was between 1,000 and 2,000—promised by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, conditional on the agreement of his parliament. Fraser declared her hope that they would

be in place by the end of the month. Ethiopia has also sent ministers to lobby Djibouti, Egypt, Kenya and Sudan to send troops to Somalia.

Even so, analysts have questioned whether Ugandan troops—which are in any case not as well equipped and battle-hardened as Ethiopia's—or any significant numbers of others will materialize. David Shinn, a former ambassador to Ethiopia and a lecturer at Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, said, "I can't imagine [Ugandan troops would] go in without others going in, too." There have been rumours that Nigeria and Sudan were willing to send troops, he continued, but until now a peacekeeping force "is still basically the figment of someone's imagination."

Last year, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan sent a letter to the Security Council noting that Uganda and Sudan had become increasingly reluctant to send troops to Somalia as the fighting there intensified and "in the absence of a secure environment."

A secure environment is the last thing that Somalia offers to an invasion force. Kenya's foreign minister, Raphael Tuju, has warned, "Failure to act immediately will lead to a vacuum that would certainly be exploited by the warlords and other extremist forces." Tuju is also lobbying for other countries to send troops. Kenya has closed its borders to the estimated 30,000 recently displaced refugees from Somalia, but presently hosts 160,000. The government has denied reports that 600 refugees, mainly women and children, were deported from a border transit camp at Liboi in government trucks.

Because of these difficulties, the US has endorsed calls by the EU and new UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the TFG to seek a political accommodation with "moderate" Islamist forces. However interim President Yusuf rejected all such requests, telling Al-Jazeera television that negotiations with Islamists "will not happen . . . We will crack down on the terrorists in any place around the nation."



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