

# Washington admits role in illegal war: US troops took part in invasion of Somalia

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Pentagon officials have confirmed for the first time that the United States has troops on the ground in Somalia. This amounts to an admission that the Bush administration is a co-belligerent with Ethiopia in its illegal war in the Horn of Africa. It is the first time that Washington has acknowledged having forces in Somalia since it pulled out in 1994 after the infamous “Black Hawk down” incident.

Somalia has become a new front in Bush’s “war on terror.” The willingness of officials to own up to the US having “boots on the ground” is an indication of the bellicose mindset that now dominates in Washington. In comparison to protracted US denials in the 1970s that it had extended the Vietnam War into Laos and Cambodia, the pretence that America was not directly involved in the invasion of Somalia lasted barely a week.

What began as a proxy war in which Ethiopia invaded its neighbour with American backing has become an openly American-directed act of imperialist aggression. The US-Ethiopian invasion of Somalia threatens to embroil the Horn of Africa in a war that may well extend far beyond this region. It is also a harbinger of future US acts of military aggression against Iran and Syria.

The Bush administration did not even attempt to deny a report in the *Washington Post* last week that it had sent Special Forces into Somalia. In advertising its illegal action the US is sending out a strong signal to its allies and potential rivals alike that it will allow none of the conventions of international relations to stand in its way.

The admission that it has forces on the ground in Somalia followed a series of US air strikes against targets in southern Somalia. It was claimed that the purpose of the air strikes was to kill three Al Qaeda suspects wanted for their alleged involvement in the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Abu Taha al-Sudani and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan have been named by US officials as part of an Al Qaeda cell in East Africa involved in the embassy bombings. A Pentagon official claimed to have “credible intelligence” that the three had taken refuge near the coastal town of Ras Kamboni near the Kenyan border. On this basis the area was attacked with AC-130 aircraft.

Initially Somali officials claimed that Fazul Abdullah Mohammed had been killed. But the US ambassador to Kenya, Michael E. Ranneberger, later denied this. “The three high-value targets are still of intense interest to us,” an unnamed US official told the press. “What we’re doing is still ongoing, we’re still in pursuit, us and the Ethiopians.”

The invasion of Somalia is the result of long term planning and preparation. In December, General John Abizaid was in Ethiopia for talks with President Meles Zenawi. The *Guardian* quoted a former US intelligence officer stating, “The meeting was just the final

handshake.”

According to the *Guardian*, the Pentagon already had Special Forces on the ground before the Ethiopian invasion. The invasion itself was planned last summer and would have taken place then had it not been for exceptionally heavy rains.

US Special Forces almost certainly accompanied Ethiopian troops into Somalia. One analyst quoted in the newspaper said, “You are going to want to have your own people on the ground.” This was in addition to the arms, fuel and logistical support that the US would have supplied for the Ethiopians.

The US has maintained a base in the former French colony of Djibouti since 2002. It also ran a CIA operation from Nairobi. The CIA recruited Somali warlords to act as US proxies. But such was the animosity to America in Mogadishu after the experience of “Operation Restore Hope”, when the US military last intervened in Somalia, that the CIA action only succeeded in uniting the warring clans behind the Islamic Courts movement. The US-backed warlords were driven out of Mogadishu and the Islamic Courts took over the capital. In the course of the summer they established control over most of the country.

At this point it seems that the Pentagon took over operations in Somalia from the CIA and began to prepare for military intervention. Talks between the Transitional Government and the United Islamic Courts were torpedoed as the Bush administration began to prepare US forces and those of Ethiopia for war. Once the ground was dry enough to allow heavy vehicles to move the invasion began.

The whole operation bears a great resemblance to the tactics employed in the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, with Ethiopia standing in for the Northern Alliance and the Transitional Government playing the role of US stooge Hamid Karzai.

Once installed in the capital President Abdullahi Yusuf of the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Government declared martial law. This has been the signal for a ruthless clampdown on the population of Mogadishu. Ethiopian troops are carrying out house-to-house searches in an attempt to seize weapons. Armed clashes have been reported and crowds have thrown stones at Ethiopian troops.

One of the first acts of the new government was to gag the media. Three local radio stations Shabelle Radio, Radio HornAfrik and Voice of the Koran radio were forced off air, and Al Jazeera’s office has been closed. Although the ban was lifted without explanation the next day, in the face of international condemnation, the instinctive response of the new government is clearly authoritarian.

The HornAfrik radio station was founded by three Canadian nationals in 1999. One of its founders, Ali Iman Sharmarke, told the *Toronto Star*, “At about one p.m. we got a letter instructing us to close

the station. We were surprised, because we thought the media could relax once the Islamists lost control.”

The station won the Canadian Journalists for Free Expression’s 2002 International Press Freedom Award because of the way in which it had resisted threats in a country dominated by rival warlords and their militias. Anne Game, the executive director of the Canadian Journalists for Freedom of Expression (CJFE), commented, “Somalia’s clampdown on its broadcasters is alarming and closes off one of the only independent news sources accessible to the people of Mogadishu.”

One of HornAfrik’s journalists Ahmed Abdisalam told the BBC, “We are very alarmed and very concerned about the trend the government is taking . . . in trying to silence the people.”

Gabriel Baglo, Africa office director of the International Federation of Journalists, said that closing the radio stations was an “unacceptable violation of press freedom.”

A spokesman for the transitional government had told AFP that the stations were responsible for “instigating violence”. The real reason for this attempt to gag the media was to silence reporting of the government’s own brutal crack down on the civilian population of Mogadishu.

Opposition to the US and Ethiopian occupation is fuelling resistance to the Transitional Government. At the same time long-standing disputes between rival clans have flared up.

The Transitional Government does not have control of the capital. President Yusuf has appointed a mayor and other officials. But as the ceremony was taking place gun fire could be heard outside the presidential palace. Yusuf himself told the press, “We see the city is in chaos. It’s not safe.”

Clashes have been reported with unidentified militias. A resident of the Hurwa district told Associated Press, “I have seen one Ethiopian military vehicle burning after it was hit by an RPG. When the exchange of gunfire started at around 11 p.m., I quickly closed my small kiosk and ran for my life.”

A 30-minute battle was reported in the northern Arafat area of the capital on Sunday. Doctors reported that eight wounded had been brought to the Madina hospital and eyewitnesses said that they had seen the bodies of Ethiopian soldiers being loaded onto trucks after the clash.

Gun battles have also been reported between clan militias in central Somalia. It is thought that 13 people were killed in an incident in the village of Goobo. The Murasade and Hawdle clans are in dispute over access to grazing and water and are said to be preparing for further fighting.

An insurgency comparable to that in Iraq is already taking shape. The only response that the US can make is repressive and brutal. It admits to one air raid in southern Somalia, but eye-witnesses claim that many more have taken place.

The proposition that the AC-130 aircraft could be used to target three individuals is patently absurd. When the US has wanted to kill individuals it has used missiles, as it did in Yemen. The purpose of the AC-130, which employs gatling guns and howitzers to strafe the ground, is to terrorize the civilian population.

There are reports of nomadic pastoralists’ camps being bombed and waterholes being destroyed. Accurate reports of the casualties are not available because aid agencies can not get into the area and the wounded cannot get out to hospitals.

However brutal the US attack on Somalia, it is unlikely to succeed in achieving US control of the region, as even supporters of the

campaign recognise. The *Los Angeles Times*, which praised the US-backed Ethiopian invasion, warned in a recent editorial that “unilateral fly-by interventions from 30,000 feet are not going to do the job alone.” It called for a political solution to be worked out between the Arab Union and the African Union, which would bring the rival clans behind the Transitional Government and allow Ethiopian troops to leave.

The US government has appealed for other African countries to provide troops under the auspices of the African Union. Seven African countries are discussing the possibility—Rwanda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, Zambia, Tunisia and Algeria. It is proposed that they provide a force of 8,000 that could take over from the Ethiopians. Uganda has offered to contribute 1,500 troops to this force. But, however eager these African regimes may be to oblige, they know that to give public support to such naked US aggression would provoke serious political problems for them at home.

What the US-Ethiopian invasion has succeeded in doing is creating a major humanitarian crisis. Aid agencies have been forced to suspend their work in Somalia. Eight million people across East Africa were already facing acute food shortages and were dependent on aid agencies for basic essentials, even before the war began.

The humanitarian situation is most serious in the border region of southern Somalia. Somali children who usually attend school in neighbouring Kenya have been forced to stay at home after the Kenyan authorities closed the border. Kenyans face similar problems as the border has been militarised and it is no longer safe for them to send their children to school.

The IRIN news agency reported a local resident from the Kenyan border town of Elkabera saying, “We moved with our children after two people from our village were killed in attacks across the border. Our children are out of school—it remains closed. We have a lot of problems like illness, hunger and fear.” Displaced people have found themselves stranded, unable to return home because of the fighting, unable to cross into Kenya and inaccessible to the aid agencies. And more people are travelling to the area from as far away as Mogadishu in the hope of finding safety. The small town of Doble, one of the places bombed in the US raids, has become home to at least 7,000 people fleeing the fighting. Aid workers reported a growing humanitarian crisis a week ago. One said, “There is no food, no water or sanitation and Doble is a small settlement that normally has 500 people.”



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