

Somalia: African Union force agreed

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The African Union has agreed to send a 7,600-strong peacekeeping force to Somalia to replace the Ethiopian troops who invaded the country in December. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has insisted that his forces will withdraw in a matter of days.

Meeting in Addis Ababa, the African Union's Peace and Security Council announced that it would deploy nine battalions of 850 soldiers. The mission is to be known as AMISOM. It will last for a period of six months and begin on January 26.

The presence of Ethiopian troops, Somalia's traditional enemy, is a major source of instability and conflict. "The sooner the Ethiopians get out of Somalia the better," Korwa Adar told the South African based Inter Press Service (IPS). Adar, an analyst at the Africa Institute of South Africa in Pretoria, said, "Their presence in Somalia will continue to cause resentment given the long history between them."

Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin has just returned to Addis from a tour of African states, trying to drum up support for the AU mission. He told Ethiopian television, "Nigeria and Libya have confirmed to me that they are willing to send peacekeeping troops to Somalia. Algeria has also stated its willingness to provide assistance to the cause."

He has, however, received a definite refusal from Angola—an indication of the difficulty the AU has in meeting up to its promises.

Angolan Foreign Minister Joao Bernardo de Miranda told the Lusa news agency, "Angola has come out of a long conflict. Our troops were involved in a draining war. It is not the time for us to be involved in a foreign military force."

The overall total promised in any event falls far short of the 10,000-plus Ethiopian troop presence. Nor will it have the air power and heavy artillery that the Ethiopians have at their disposal. And so far only Uganda has made a concrete public commitment. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has agreed to make 1,500 troops available. His ruling party agreed to the deployment at the weekend.

The AU anticipates that its force will become a UN mission after six months. As such it "will support the long-term stabilisation and post-conflict reconstruction of Somalia," according to a statement issued from the organisation's headquarters. For that it will need international financial support.

The actions of the transitional government are throwing that support into doubt. There have been numerous appeals by the imperialist powers for the government to reach some form of accommodation with what are routinely described as "moderate Islamists" as well as with the various warlords and clan chiefs.

The aim is to provide a modicum of popular legitimacy for a regime that is seen as a US puppet and one that is militarily dependent on Somalia's traditional enemy, Ethiopia.

Thus far these appeals have been rejected. The dismissal of the speaker of the transitional parliament, Hassan Sheikh Adan, has antagonised both the United States and the European Union. Adan is viewed as one of the few members of the parliament who is not entirely favourable to Ethiopia. He was sacked when he attempted to start talks with former supporters of the United Islamic Courts, whose leaders were driven out of Mogadishu by the Ethiopian invasion.

His dismissal makes the regime much more open to the charge of being an Ethiopian puppet and will make an agreement with the powerful clan leaders and warlords more difficult to achieve.

Adan told Associated Press in a telephone interview, "They have been ordered to vote me out by the president, Abdullahi Yusuf, who wants to rule Somalia through Ethiopian forces and through this parliament. The president wants to crack down on all those who are against him."

US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer condemned the sacking. She said, "The past has to be left in the past ... the symbol of the president and the prime minister combining to push him out is counter to that spirit of reconciliation."

US Ambassador to Kenya Michael Ranneberger expressed his frustration. At a press conference in Nairobi he demanded to know, "Was there a proper forum of parliament? Were the stated procedures of parliament followed? Were the procedures and parameters of the transitional federal charter followed?"

The EU will discuss the situation in Somalia next week. It is proposing to offer €15 million to help fund the AU mission, but is concerned about the dismissal of Adan. An EU official commented, "The EU will say it remains concerned by the current state of the reconciliation process."

A draft statement issued to the press ahead of the meeting insisted, "It is of the utmost importance to ensure that all key stakeholders—including clan elders, Islamic leaders, representatives of the business community, civil society and women—are engaged."

The chairman of the Union of Islamic Courts, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, is reported to have crossed the border into Kenya. He surrendered himself to the Kenyan security services and was immediately flown to Nairobi under conditions of high security. He is reported to be under US protection in a top hotel in the Kenyan capital.

There has been no comment from the US embassy in Nairobi.

But Ranneberger has repeatedly identified Ahmed as one of the moderate Islamists with whom the transitional government should do a deal. Ahmed shared the leadership of the courts with Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, identified by the US as a member of Al Qaeda. Aweys is on the US wanted list.

Without help from Ahmed or other leading members of the Islamic Courts, alongside the clan leaders and warlords, it is unlikely that the transitional government can establish control of Mogadishu. And if the government is isolated it will make the task of the AU peacekeeping force impossible.

Last Friday night the presidential palace came under mortar fire. The president was in his palace, but was said to be unhurt. On Saturday an Ethiopian tank column was attacked. Four civilians were reported to have been killed when the Ethiopians opened fire. On Sunday Ethiopians troops were reported to have killed three civilians after they blasted their way into a house where they claimed gunmen were hiding.

The action of the US in bombing southern Somalia has made it even more difficult for African countries to intervene. Even Zenawi recognizes the problem. When Orla Guerin of the BBC asked him if he thought the US air strike was misguided, he replied, "We were there, we saw what happened. This is not to say that the American intervention at that particular moment was fortunate." Guerin then asked him, "Do you think it shouldn't have happened?" to which Zenawi responded, "It could have been avoided."

South Africa is one of the prime candidates for contributing to a peacekeeping force. But President Thabo Mbeki has publicly expressed his concern about the US air raids on southern Somalia. The attacks, he pointed out, had claimed the lives of innocent civilians and would provide no solution for the tribal and political conflicts in the region. Somalis, he said, believed that the US bombing was in revenge for the deaths of 18 US soldiers in the Black Hawk Down incident in 1993.

Mbeki insisted that African countries must provide peacekeeping troops, but when Kenyan Foreign Minister Raphael Tuju approached South Africa for help, Mbeki initially prevaricated. It was left to Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad to say that South Africa would not send troops to Somalia. An anonymous South African official told the *Mail and Guardian* that the government was unwilling to send troops because it did not want to be seen as fighting the war on terror on behalf of the US.

David Monyae, a lecturer of international relations at South Africa's University of Witwatersrand, told the IPS, "The recent intervention by the US planes to bomb (fleeing) Somali (Islamist) locations has complicated Africa's position. It has muddied the water. As a result, whoever intervenes by deploying troops in Somalia will be seen as a US agent."

"You don't want to deploy troops that will be butchered," he added.

Any African force that is seen as doing the bidding of Washington could rapidly find itself facing as much hostility as the Ethiopians are now. The US has so far provided \$40 million in aid to Somalia. The transitional government has requested more money and assistance in training a police force and army. There is certainly support for this within the US political elite. The

American Enterprise Institute recently hosted a press conference at which a representative of the transitional government announced its request for funds. The US already runs training programmes in a number of African countries. But the presence of even a small number of US personnel in Somalia would inevitably provoke hostility after the experience of Operation Restore Hope.

With African countries reluctant to step in, there is pressure on the US military to become more directly involved. Channel 4 reporter Nima Elbagir recently reported on the developing opposition to the transitional government. She warned that if the US "doesn't go in fully, what it's done is to create a fertile recruiting ground." Larry Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington, who was an assistant defence secretary responsible for manpower and logistics in the early 1980s, has openly speculated about US paratroopers being deployed in Somalia.

The US already has small numbers of its special forces on the ground in southern Somalia, where they have been hunting down alleged members of Al Qaeda. US General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress last week that the operation in southern Somalia is being conducted under the Pentagon's authority to track down and kill terror suspects internationally.

A report in the *Sunday Times* has also indicated that the British SAS is involved in the operation. The paper quoted CIA sources who said that they had been using the "professional assistance" of the SAS since the end of 2005. "The brief was to enter Somali territory with the objective of studying the terrain, mapping and analysing landing sites and regrouping areas, and reporting on suitable 'entry and exit points.'"

The CIA source admitted that the US had been "bankrolling the Ethiopians since the start of last year, as well as providing them with satellite surveillance, technical, military and logistical support."

The pressure on Ethiopia to pull out comes not only from within Somalia, but from the threat posed by neighbouring countries and the risk of divisions inside Ethiopia being exacerbated. President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea recently told Al Jazeera television that Ethiopia was stuck in a "quagmire." He warned, "The Islamic Courts have not been defeated."

Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter two-year war that only ended in 2000. The border between them is still undecided and is policed by a UN force. Last month the US Council on Foreign Relations warned that an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia had the potential to become a conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. There are already low-intensity conflicts between Ethiopia and separatist movements, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. Both these movements look to Eritrea for support.



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