

US presses African Union to send troops into Somalia

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As the African Union (AU) summit drew to a close last week there was still no sign that other African forces were ready to take over from Ethiopian troops in Somalia who have already begun to withdraw. African leaders meeting in Addis Ababa agreed that a force of 8,000 peacekeepers were needed. Despite pressure from US Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Fraser, however, and a February 2 appeal by the United Nations Security Council, only an eight-man fact finding mission has been despatched to Mogadishu by the AU to assess the security situation.

The chief executive of the African Union, Alpha Oumar Konare, told delegates at a meeting in Addis Ababa last week, "Let's be clear, we need to get the deployment off. The more we delay in deploying troops, the more chance of the situation worsening." He warned, "If the African troops are not deployed rapidly, then there will be chaos."

Fraser told reporters, "We are ready to provide airlift and contracting airplanes for the African peacekeeping force in Somalia." She said that she had discussed the US proposals with Konare.

Uganda, Nigeria and Malawi were initially said to have offered 4,000 soldiers between them. But no sooner had the conference ended than even this figure began to seem less certain.

President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda has offered 1000 troops. He now faces internal opposition. Ugandan shadow foreign affairs minister, Reagan Okumu, said, "We shall not be party to such deployment unless all the terms and conditions set are met." According to the Kampala paper *New Vision* opposition MPs wanted to know who would compensate the families of soldiers killed in the operation.

President Bingu wa Mutharika denied that Malawi had offered to send troops to Somalia. He flatly contradicted an earlier statement by the defence minister. He told the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, "It is not true that

Malawi has offered to send troops to Somalia and we have not discussed this in cabinet."

Tanzania flatly turned down calls to send troops and has now offered to train 1,000 Somali troops instead.

The US is pursuing a three pronged strategy in Somalia, according to Fraser. She told a conference in Washington last month that she saw "a glimmer of hope" for Somalia. Her plan, she said, was to provide support for the Transitional Federal Government, to support the deployment of an African Union peacekeeping force and to encourage talks between the Transitional Federal Government and "moderate" Islamists in the United Islamic Courts.

It is a strategy that is running into trouble on all three fronts. Not only has the attempt to deploy an African peacekeeping force proved to be extremely difficult, but efforts to engage the Islamists have proved elusive. Following the US bombing of southern Somalia it is politically dangerous for any African leader, inside or outside Somalia to be identified too closely with US policy.

The limited video footage that has come out of the bombed areas shows extensive damage. Eye-witnesses report pastoralists' camps bombed and water holes destroyed. The scale of the destruction was out of character with the stated objective of the bombing, which was to hunt down three alleged Al Qaeda operatives.

Also speaking at the Washington conference, Theresa Whelan, US deputy assistant secretary of defence for African affairs, said that the purpose of American military operations in Somalia was to bring Al Qaeda operatives to justice. She denied that any civilians had been killed in US bombing of southern Somalia. When asked about 70 reported civilian deaths she said, "I can assure you they were fighters. There were no civilians killed in the US strike."

All those killed, Whelan said, were members of Al

Shabaab, a militant faction of the Islamic Courts. Al Shabaab, Whelan told a reporter from the Nairobi based *East African*, had hijacked the Islamic Courts. They had driven the Islamic Courts into “an agenda of military expansion and aggression.”

In an attempt to recover from what has proved to be a diplomatic disaster, the US now appears to be making a distinction between the United Islamic Courts and Al Shabaab.

Frazer told *allafrica.com* that the US did not regard the Islamic Courts as a front for Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, she said, was linked to Al Shabaab, but the Islamic Courts was “a heterogeneous group from the outset”, which included “moderate individuals who could be drawn into the larger, official political process.”

It is these “moderate individuals” who the US now wants to engage in dialogue that were driven out of Mogadishu by the Ethiopian invasion. Why a major invasion, complete with air support, had to be mounted to remove a government consisting largely of “moderate individuals” no one in the US administration has explained.

This turn around in the US attitude to the Islamic Courts reflects divisions within the Bush administration. US ambassador to Kenya Michael Ranneberger has long insisted that there were elements within the Islamic Courts with whom the US could do business.

One of them was Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, chairman of the Islamic Courts. He recently gave himself up to Kenyan forces after fleeing from Mogadishu. He was taken to one of Nairobi’s top hotels under US protection. He has since gone to Yemen. He refused to answer reporters’ questions as he left, but he assured Reuters, “I am 100 percent fine.”

Ahmed may be going to Yemen to discuss with other Islamic leaders prior to talks with the TFG. Both the US and the EU have put pressure on President Abdullahi Yusuf of the TFG to hold talks with Islamists like Ahmed and clan leaders. Some commentators have called into doubt Ahmed’s ability to play a major role in the clan politics of Somalia. But his real disability is the publicly voiced US backing for him. As one supporter of the Islamic Courts told a reporter from the *East African*, “Sheikh Ahmed has become an American stooge.”

There is mounting hostility to the intervention. Hundreds demonstrated in Mogadishu against the deployment of foreign troops. They carried placards condemning US interference in Somalia. Meanwhile Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed has warned against foreign

intervention. He told reporters, “Peacekeepers could not bring peace in Somalia. Their deployment will add to the already difficult security situation in the country. Only Somalis can bring peace if they are given the chance to do so.”

For its part, the TFG that depended on US support to bring it to power has proved to be reluctant to pursue a policy of reconciliation with elements from the Islamic Courts and clan leaders. One of its first actions was to have the speaker of the Transitional Parliament, Sharif Hassan Sheik Aden, dismissed after he tried to initiate talks with the Islamists.

President Abdullahi Yusuf of the TFG has agreed to call a reconciliation conference. But his announcement seems to be designed to secure the £15 million (US\$ 29.4 million) of aid offered by the European Union (EU). Reaching out to opposition elements was a condition of this grant. The EU also demanded that the TFG reinstate Sharif Hassan Sheik Aden. Yusuf has refused to do that and instead appointed a former warlord, Sheikh Adan Mohamed Nur, as speaker. The EU has nonetheless agreed to pay the promised money.

Yusuf seems to be calculating that the EU can do very little without US backing and the US has bigger fish to fry as it moves towards war with Iran. The US has already begun to reduce its naval presence off the Somali coast. The aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower has been redeployed to the Gulf. Two ships, the guided missile cruise USS Bunker Hill and the amphibious landing craft USS Ashland remain off the Somali coast. But more US withdrawals are scheduled to take place in line with the withdrawal of Ethiopian land-based forces.

Yusuf seems to be gambling that he can establish the position of the TFG by playing off one clan against another and implementing repressive measures. This was very much the way in which the last US backed ruler of Somalia, Siad Barre, maintained his rule. Yusuf has introduced martial law. This puts all powers into his hands for the next three months. A curfew has been imposed in Mogadishu and other main towns and the government has said that the heavily armed population will be disarmed by force.



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