

War crimes investigation after Ethiopia shells civilians in Somali capital

Ann Talbot
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The European Union (EU) has begun a war crimes investigation after Ethiopian and Ugandan forces backing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) attacked civilian areas in the Somali capital of Mogadishu. Ethiopia invaded Somalia at the end of last year to install the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which is backed by the US and the EU.

Ugandan troops arrived as part of an African Union peace keeping force—Amisom—that was supposed to replace the Ethiopians. But rather than withdrawing, the Ethiopian force has launched a full scale assault on the civilian population of Mogadishu.

More than 1,000 people are thought to have been killed as residential areas came under heavy shelling from artillery, tanks and helicopter gun ships. Homes, shops, schools, hospitals and warehouses have been destroyed, according to local witnesses. Entire neighbourhoods have been demolished.

The United Nations estimates that 124,000 of the city's residents have fled and are living in makeshift camps. Doctors report that disease is now widespread because of lack of shelter, clean water and sanitation. Hospitals in the capital are overstretched by caring for more than 4,000 wounded. The Red Cross said the fighting was the worst in the capital in 15 years.

Unless it investigates the allegations the European Commission (EC) itself will be liable to war crimes charges because it is the largest donor to the Somali and Ethiopian governments. It backed the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia at the end of last year and is providing financial support for the deployment of Amisom.

News of the war crimes investigation broke when a letter was leaked to the British-based *Guardian* newspaper. The EU security adviser for the area wrote to Eric van der Linden, EU representative in Kenya, warning, "I need to advise you that there are strong grounds to believe that the Ethiopian government and the transitional federal government of Somalia and the Amisom force commander...have through commission or omission violated the Rome statute of the international criminal court [ICC]."

"In regards the above-mentioned violations of international law," the letter went on, "there arises urgent questions of responsibility and potential complicity in the commission of war crimes by the European Commission and its partners,

specifically with regard to the current and ongoing financial and technical assistance being provided by the EC to any of the parties who may have committed war crimes."

When asked about the question of war crimes US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Frazer said that the US preferred to discuss such matters with its friends in private. The US government has already promised \$40 million in aid to the Somali government and plans to make another \$60 million available for security and to finance the AU mission.

Frazer was paying an unannounced visit to the town of Baidoa where the TFG is still based. Her visit, at the beginning of April, was the first time a top US official has been to Ethiopia since US forces were driven out of the country following the Blackhawk Down incident in 1993.

The US administration is well placed to know exactly what the Ethiopian military has been doing in Somalia because it has special forces embedded with it. They were responsible for directing the invasion and it is difficult to believe that they were not intimately involved in the recent operation to crush opposition in the capital. Unlike leading EU countries, the US has not ratified the treaty that created the International Criminal Court and its citizens are not subject to the court's jurisdiction.

Ethiopian Foreign Affairs Spokesman Solomon Abebe was reported on the Voice of America denying that Ethiopian troops had committed war crimes. "In fact, the [war] crimes were committed by extremists, who are defying resolutions of the Security Council and the wishes of the international community," he said. "These extremists have been killing innocent people of Mogadishu daily. They were attacking, using mortars and missiles. They were killing and shelling civilians, starting from the beginning."

Ugandan Minister of State for Defence Ruth Nankabirwa described the allegations "as unfair and uncalled for." She said, "We are thin in number and could not help much, but all we did was to bring the two warring sides to talk—and that is how the ceasefire came about." She demanded: "Whoever is alleging that we committed war crimes should withdraw that statement with apologies."

But the Ethiopian helicopters that attacked residential areas were operating out of the Amisom-controlled airport, which is in the hands of Ugandan troops. The role of the Ugandans will

therefore be part of any investigation.

The extent of US involvement is beginning to emerge. Ethiopia is a key US ally in the Horn of Africa. It is alleged that supposed terrorist suspects from 19 countries are being held in three secret CIA prisons in Ethiopia. Hundreds of prisoners are thought to have been transferred from Somalia and Kenya. They include 19 women and 15 children. According to a Kenyan Muslim group there is at least one US citizen among them, as well as Canadian, French and Swedish citizens.

Richard Kolko, spokesman for the FBI, admitted that US officials had questioned prisoners in Ethiopia, but denied that they were in US custody. A western diplomat who spoke to Associated Press on condition of anonymity claimed that the US was playing a guiding role in the detentions.

John Sifton of Human Rights Watch said that the operation in Ethiopia was a “decentralized, outsourced Guantanamo.” The Pentagon admits that at least one person arrested after the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, Mohamed Abul Malik, has been flown to Guantanamo.

One former detainee has been able to speak publicly about her experience. Kamilya Mohammedi Tuweni says she was held for nearly three months without charge in Ethiopia. She says she was interviewed and fingerprinted by a US agent after being arrested in Kenya while she was on a business trip. She was flown to Somalia and from there to Ethiopia. A flight manifest confirms that she was flown to Mogadishu.

Safia Benaouda, a 17-year-old Swedish national, was also arrested in Kenya. She alleged that she was beaten with a stick while in detention. There are thought to be three other Swedish nationals being held in Ethiopia.

Amir Mohamed Meshal, a 24 -year-old American from Tinton Falls, New Jersey, is still in detention in Ethiopia, according to the *Washington Post*, despite protests from the US embassy and the FBI.

The Horn of Africa has become a new front in US attempts to dominate the globe and its resources. Jendayi Frazer brushed aside the ten days of violence against civilians in Mogadishu. She claimed that both sides had used “excessive force” and blamed “insurgents” for firing mortars from residential districts. But human rights activists reported in the Ugandan press claim that the Somali government and its backers have targeted two sub-clans of the Hawiye clan—the main clan in the capital. They accuse the government of trying to “cleanse” Mogadishu. Their allegations are supported by the remarks of Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf, who recently warned that civilian areas which did not accept the legitimacy of the government would be bombarded. Fighting is likely to resume soon. Ethiopian and TFG troops took advantage of a precarious ceasefire to begin digging trenches in preparation for further conflict. A TFG official told residents still in the city to leave while they have the chance. The conflict in the capital has widened rifts within the TFG itself. Speaking in neighbouring Eritrea Deputy Prime Minister Hussein Aideed said “The

credibility of the whole (government) has been compromised ... It has collapsed.”

“The invading Ethiopian troops have destroyed a 10-km sq. (area of the city in which) 1,086 civilians have been killed ... A massacre has happened,” he said.

Former speaker of the Transitional Parliament Sharif Hassan Sheik Aden has also been in Eritrea meeting President Isias Afwerki. He told the Shabelle Radio that the occupation of Somalia is illegal. “In fact the Ethiopian forces had forcefully occupied the country of Somalia claiming that it is helping the interim government.” Aden said, “The Ethiopian troops did not enter Somalia with the approval of the Somali people and the international community.”

The involvement of Eritrea points to the potential widening of the conflict to include other countries in the Horn of Africa. Somali Foreign Minister Ishmael Hurreh accused Eritrea of interfering in Somalia. “The government of Eritrea is openly involved in undermining, including through the use of force, the legitimately recognized transitional federal government of Somalia,” Hurreh told his fellow ministers.

Ethiopian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Tekeda Alemu added “Eritrea is not simply supporting terrorism, it is actively involved in terrorism in Ethiopia and our sub-region.”

Jendayi Frazer joined in leveling accusations against Eritrea. She accused it of backing insurgents and trying to destabilize Somalia. Her presence in Somalia and her verbal attack on Eritrea indicate the importance that the US gives to the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia may prove to be only the first phase of a war to gain outright US control of this strategic area.

The debacle in Iraq has not discouraged the US from launching more military adventures. It has become even more reckless and Frazer’s remarks suggest that the US is considering extending its operations into Eritrea. The forces it used in the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia were based in the former French colony of Djibouti. This pattern of military intervention is to become the form that US operations take in Africa under its newly- established Africa Command. Djibouti is to be only the first of many small so-called lily-pad bases from which special forces will operate in conjunction with local troops from allied countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda. The US has set its sights on strategic domination of Africa and the sea lanes that carry much of the world’s trade around the continent.



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