

US Navy bombards Somalia

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For the third time this year, the United States military has attacked Somalia in the Horn of Africa. The *Washington Post* quoted an anonymous US official who said that the US navy had launched missile strikes on the port of Baar Gaal and surrounding areas in Puntland. Local sources reported farms destroyed and hilltops flattened by the missile strikes.

The Puntland authorities made the improbable claim that there were no civilian casualties because the area was uninhabited. Only militant Islamists were killed, the report stated. Among them were eight foreign militants who were said to be from Britain, Eritrea, Sweden, the US and Yemen.

The US launched at least two air strikes in the south of Somalia earlier this year. It devastated coastal towns and pastoralist camps on the Kenyan border in those raids, claiming to be in pursuit of three suspects involved in the 1998 Kenyan and Tanzanian embassy bombings. The same anonymous US official told the *Washington Post* that the naval bombardment in the north had been another attempt to kill one of those responsible for the embassy bombings.

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates refused to comment. "That's possibly an ongoing operation," he said.

The US Defense Department stated, "This is a global war on terror and the US remains committed to reducing terrorist capabilities when and where we find them. The very nature of some of our operations, as well as the success of those operations, is often predicated on our ability to work quietly with our partners and allies."

This new front in the US "war on terror" is unfolding free from any scrutiny by the world's media. Apart from a few brief reports, there has been an almost total news blackout on the event. Since the US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in December last year very little news has filtered out from the region. It has

become an area in which the US military can operate with impunity.

An unknown number of alleged Islamic militants are being held in secret prisons in Ethiopia where they are being interrogated by FBI and CIA personnel. At least two US citizens are among them. Women and children are also said to be among the prisoners. The European Union has launched a war crimes investigation after allegations of ill-treatment and torture began to emerge from prisoners who had been released.

The operation in northern Somalia follows the pattern set by the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia and the air strikes that were carried out in the south. Local forces provide the ground troops with US special forces directing them and calling in air support, or in this case naval support, to provide heavy fire power when necessary.

This method of using local proxy forces was developed in the Horn of Africa after the US military were defeated and driven out in 1993 following the "Black Hawk down" incident. Since then, the US military have avoided exposing large numbers of their own troops to danger.

With the formation of a new US military command specifically for Africa, the tactics developed in the Horn of Africa are to be applied to the whole of the continent. A series of military bases are to be set up across Africa, which will be the jumping-off point for operations by local proxy forces led by US special forces units.

The new tactic is an attempt to maintain and extend US control over Africa resources, especially oil. It is a response in particular to the growing influence of China in Africa. Chinese companies are exploring and developing oilfields all over the continent, including the Horn of Africa.

A fleet of US and British ships permanently patrol the waters off the Horn of Africa. It is one of the world's

major sea lanes allowing access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. A 2005 report prepared for Donald Rumsfeld warned that China was adopting a “string of pearls” approach to controlling the sea lanes of Asia. The Horn of Africa has been a key point in such a strategy for the waters around Africa since the nineteenth century. The US is currently established in the former French colony of Djibouti. It does not intend to allow China to rival its control of this strategic choke-point in world trade.

Puntland is an area in the northeast of Somalia in the very tip of the Horn. Tribal elders declared it an autonomous state in 1998 and have looked to Ethiopia for support since then. Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, who is currently president of the Somali Transitional Federal Government and was installed in Mogadishu by Ethiopian forces, was formerly president of Puntland.

The Ethiopian invasion brought down the United Islamic Courts and installed the Transitional Federal Government. Ethiopian troops were due to pull out several months ago and hand over peacekeeping duties to an African Union force known as AMISOM. So far just over 1,000 Ugandan troops have arrived and the Ethiopians are still in place. Without them the pro-Western government would be overwhelmed.

The Transitional Federal Government claims to have defeated the United Islamic Courts in southern Somalia and that militants have fled to the north. But the scale of the US assault suggests that the situation is highly unstable.

In reality the Transitional Federal Government has little control even in the capital of Mogadishu. Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Gedi had to be rescued from his official residence in Mogadishu by Ugandan troops after a car bombing on Sunday, June 3. It is being suggested that he may have to move out of the capital for his own safety as there are now daily attacks by suicide bombers, roadside bombs and shootings.



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