Ethiopia accused of using white phosphorus bombs in US-backed occupation of Somalia

Brian Smith
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A new report by United Nations arms monitors accuses Ethiopia's army of using illegal white phosphorus bombs during the US-backed occupation of Somalia.

The report was compiled by a UN panel of independent experts and analysts and was delivered to the UN Security Council at the end of July. It covers the period from November 2006 to late June 2007.

The most damning accusation in the report is that during a battle in Mogadishu on April 13 between the Ethiopian military and the forces of the United Islamic Courts (known as Shabaab), "Ethiopian military forces resorted to using white phosphorus bombs.... [A]pproximately 15 Shabaab fighters and 35 civilians were killed."

Residents reportedly said that the bombs literally melted people. The report's analysts said this was not an isolated incident.

The Ethiopian government denied the accusation, calling it "baseless." But the UN monitors provided bomb scene photographs and soil sample evidence indicating that the soil at the impact area had 117 times the normal amount of phosphorus.

White phosphorus is particularly dangerous to exposed people because it continues to burn unless deprived of oxygen or until it is completely consumed, in some cases burning right down to the bone. Phosphorus burns carry a greater risk of mortality than other forms of burns due to the absorption of phosphorus into the body, resulting in liver, heart and kidney damage, and in some cases multi-organ failure.

Its use by the US occupying forces against enemy areas in Fallujah, Iraq, was reported as early as April 2004. The US military denied this for 18 months until November 2005, when Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Barry Venable confirmed to the BBC that white phosphorus had been used as an antipersonnel weapon, and was quoted stating, "Yes, it was used as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants" (see "New revelations of US military use of white phosphorus in Iraq").

During last year's Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, Israel stated that it had used phosphorus shells "against military targets in open ground" in south Lebanon. However, several sources reported that they had seen Lebanese civilians with injuries characteristic of phosphorus.

The use of white phosphorus in civilian areas or as an anti-personnel incendiary is illegal and was banned (by signatory countries) in the 1980 United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol III. The United States, aware of the chemical's usefulness from its experiences in Korea and Vietnam, opted out of signing.

The UN monitors also confirm reports that on June 1 of this year, the US Navy "attacked by firing several times at suspected al-Qaeda operatives near the coastal village of Bargal in Puntland, Somalia." When questioned, the US government said it had "conducted several strikes in self-defence against al-Qaeda terrorist targets in Somalia."

Claims of self defence are absurd when the missiles were fired from a ship anchored off the coast, as are claims of a targeted attack—local sources reported farms destroyed and hilltops flattened by the missile strikes (see "US Navy bombards Somalia").

The invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia began in December of last year. It was intended to install the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), led by former warlord Abdullahi Yusuf, and to oust the United Islamic Courts (UIC) administration, which had won popular support by bringing some stability to

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Mogadishu and much of the south of Somalia after more than a decade of low-level civil war. Washington backed the invasion on the grounds that the UIC contained radical Islamists and was supposedly sheltering members of Al Qaeda.

The US launched at least two air strikes in the south of Somalia during the invasion's aftermath, devastating coastal towns and pastoralist camps on the Kenyan border, and killing 31 civilians near Afmadow. The attacks were launched from the US base in Djibouti, which serves as the US military training and operations centre for the Horn of Africa.

For the first few months of this year, with little coverage in the Western media, the Ethiopian military, backed by Washington, unleashed an intense bombardment of Mogadishu's crowded and impoverished urban neighbourhoods, killing and wounding thousands and turning hundreds of thousands more into homeless refugees without adequate water, food or medicine. Fighting between insurgents and Ethiopian and Somali government troops displaced more than half of Mogadishu's population while the humanitarian situation deteriorated rapidly.

A long-awaited peace conference is now underway in Mogadishu, seeking to reconcile the country's myriad clans, political factions and former warlords. The intention is to impose a regime that will be subservient to Ethiopia and its US backers.

This looks unlikely to succeed since two key constituencies were absent: representatives of the UIC and of the powerful Hawiye clan. Both refused to attend the talks in protest at the continued presence of Ethiopian troops in the country and the interim government's unwillingness to engage with its opponents.

According to the UN refugee agency, some 125,000 of the estimated 400,000 who fled the capital between February and May have now returned. Further fighting has flared up since talks began, and nearly 21,000 have left Mogadishu again in June and July.

The UN arms monitors report states, "Antagonism against Ethiopia is at a crescendo, clearly not being helped by the Ethiopian army's heavy-handed response to insurgent attacks involving the use of disproportionate force."

It also claims that the number of weapons now in Somalia exceeds that during the civil war period of the early 1990s. "In brief, Somalia is awash with arms," it states. "There is no clearly established authority that has the capability of exercising control over a majority [of the weapons]."

The UN monitors describe persistent instability in Somalia since the invasion, in which the UIC is far from a spent force, and in which the former warlords are reasserting themselves. The panel found that "warlords are now among the most important buyers of arms at the Bakaraaha arms markets" in Mogadishu "and are trying to regain control over their former fiefdoms (which they lost to the [UIC] in 2006)."

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