

Somalia: Humanitarian disaster looms as government clamps down on insurgency

Brian Smith
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Somali and Ethiopian troops have ordered thousands to vacate their homes in Somalia's capital to allow them to conduct searches for arms and insurgents, according to local group Elman Human Rights. These evictions are the first reported since April, when hundreds died in heavy fighting in Mogadishu.

The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) launched a massive operation last week aimed at stamping out the Iraqi-style insurgency against the TFG and its Ethiopian backers, which has claimed thousands of lives this year.

The TFG, a United Nations Security Council creation, was installed in Mogadishu in December following a United States-led Ethiopian invasion of Somalia against the Islamic Courts Union, which then controlled a substantial part of the country, including the capital. A raging insurgency has steadily escalated since the installation of the TFG and confined it to a handful of heavily-fortified buildings in Mogadishu, which has become a Baghdad-like mess of suicide attacks, roadside bombs and assassinations.

Jennifer Pagonis, from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) said that "Mogadishu has become divided into two parts; the northern part is becoming increasingly deserted as residents flee clashes between the Ethiopian-backed TFG forces and insurgents, whereas the southern part of the city is calm".

The Bakara market, once one of the biggest in East Africa, is barely functioning. "People are scared to walk close to the market with only the most desperate still going, risking their lives to sell a few vegetables as they have no other way of keeping their children from starving," Pagonis said. Smaller markets have opened in southern Mogadishu, but residents fear the fighting will eventually come there.

The authorities plan to set up more than 50 bases in Mogadishu to be run by the TFG forces, and to divide the city into four security zones with soldiers stationed at every junction in an attempt to maintain security and stability.

TFG forces have also attempted to silence the media with Somalia's Shabelle Media Network targeted by heavy gunfire last week, forcing it to cease its operations. Journalists and human rights defenders live in a climate of fear and intimidation, with seven journalists killed since January, and

dozens more threatened into silence or detained.

The violence in Mogadishu has driven hundreds of thousands of civilians from the city this year, forcing them to live in squalid camps on the outskirts of the capital, where they have limited access to food and water, and lack shelter, medical and sanitation facilities.

There are more than 700,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) across Somalia, and the 22 IDP settlements are struggling to cope with the new arrivals. The World Food Program (WFP) is currently feeding 1.2 million people in the country, more than 15 percent of the population.

The government claimed in May that the insurgents had been ousted after three months of fighting which had uprooted almost 400,000 civilians. However ongoing violence sparked a second wave of fighting and displacement in June, and a third wave last month.

Nearly 65,000 people have fled Mogadishu since the beginning of June, 11,000 of them in September. UNHCR reports that it has begun distributing relief supplies to 24,000 people in Afgooye, 30 kilometres west of Mogadishu, many of whom have fled the recent upsurge in violence.

Similarly Jowhar, 50 miles north of Mogadishu, which was once the regional breadbasket but has recently been hit by drought and then floods, is now struggling to cope with thousands of refugees driven from their homes in the capital.

"Thousands of people are marching right up to the edge of a crisis," said Peter Goossens, the director of the WFP in Somalia. "Any additional little thing, any little flood or drought will push them over."

UNHCR reports that throughout September almost two boats a day have arrived on Yemeni shores from Somalia carrying some 4,741 people, mostly Somalis and Ethiopians fleeing conflict and drought. This is an increase of 70 percent over the same period last year. Almost 14,000 people have made the perilous voyage across the gulf to Yemen this year. The exodus eased off in the summer due to rough seas but resumed again at the beginning of September.

There are clear signs that Somalia faces a famine over the next period: the cereal harvest is the worst in 13 years; inflation is running high with prices for staple items doubling or even tripling over the past few months; and malnutrition rates are

rising sharply. A report on the UK-based Channel 4 News showed children with swollen bellies and stick-thin legs in camps outside the city.

Hundreds of delegates met in Asmara, Eritrea last month, representing a mix of clan and Islamist militias, former parliament members, and others of the Somali diaspora, to form the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia whose resentment of Ethiopia is a galvanising force. The spokesman for Alliance, Zakariya Mahamud Abdi, explained that their forces are targeting Ethiopian troops, as an army of occupation that protects an illegitimate government. “We are attacking the Ethiopian occupation in Mogadishu,” said Abdi. “Wherever and whenever there is an Ethiopian soldier on the soil of Somalia, we will attack them until we liberate our country from their occupation.”

A multimillion-dollar clan reconciliation conference backed by the TFG also took place last month, with some elders later travelling to Saudi Arabia to sign a ceremonial agreement. But Somalia’s myriad clans are still not reconciled, and even the TFG is riven by divisions.

Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Gedi and President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed have a long-running feud and are currently at loggerheads over whether some of Gedi’s allies should face corruption charges. Attorney General Abdullahi Dahir Barre, a Yusuf ally, ordered the arrest of Chief Justice Yusuf Ali Harun, a Gedi ally, on charges of stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars, in retaliation Gedi fired Barre.

The two leaders, who belong to rival clans, have previously clashed over who has control of foreign aid and trade deals, and potentially lucrative oil exploration contracts.

Yusuf was formerly the leader of the semi-autonomous territory of Puntland in the north but left to become president of Somalia taking troops, vehicles, weapons and ammunition with him. Oil exploration rights in Puntland have been sold several times over, but Gedi has refused to endorse them. He was also reportedly furious when Yusuf signed oil agreements, including one with a Chinese company.

The ongoing dispute between the two leaders, and the country’s descent into anarchy caused by the US-Ethiopian invasion, have been factors in the fracturing of the country, in particular the recent fighting between Puntland and its neighbour Somaliland, which has been virtually independent from the rest of the country for 16 years.

The focus of regional fighting has been the disputed Sool region, which is primarily split between sub-clans backing either Somaliland or Puntland, though some of them want autonomy for Sool itself. “There is a growing buildup of arms and troops inside the region, with deliveries coming by land on a daily basis,” said Haji Mohamed Jama, a resident of Las Anod, the capital of Sool.

The dispute has been compounded by the secession of much of the Sanaag region from Puntland, to form yet another self-governing entity in the north, renamed Makhir. Tension

between Makhir and Puntland is high.

Impervious to the centrifugal forces at play or the human misery they have caused, the US administration still intend to back the TFG until elections which are due in 2009.

The Washington-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) recently addressed the US Congress’ House Committee on Foreign Affairs in a submission entitled “The human rights and humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa”. The report condemns the US for its support of Ethiopia, particularly in its invasion of Somalia and the US administration’s general policy in the region.

Whilst observing that “there are no clean hands among the hostile parties”, in both Somalia and the Ogaden (the ethnic Somali region of Ethiopia), HRW explain that the focus of its report is “the conduct of the Ethiopian military”, primarily “because Ethiopia is a key ally and partner of the United States in the Horn of Africa.”

Ethiopian forces backing the TFG have “violated the laws of war by widely and indiscriminately bombarding highly populated areas of Mogadishu with rockets, mortars and artillery.” It is accused of having specifically targeted hospitals.

The conduct of the Ethiopian army in the Ogaden is also condemned. Its crimes include “civilians targeted intentionally; villages burned to the ground as part of a campaign of collective punishment; public executions meant to terrify onlooking villagers; rampant sexual violence used as a tool of warfare; thousands of arbitrary arrests and widespread and sometimes deadly torture and beatings in military custody; a humanitarian and trade blockade on the entire conflict area; and hundreds of thousands of people forced away from their homes and driven to hunger and malnutrition.”

HRW point out that the US “is viewed regionally as the Ethiopian government’s main backer and implicitly—if not directly—responsible for the Ethiopian government’s conduct. Therefore, US support for Ethiopia’s abusive counter insurgency efforts in the Horn of Africa threatens to make the United States complicit in continuing laws of war violations by the Ethiopian government.”

HRW also warn the US administration that its policy “will lead to a mountain of civilian deaths and a litany of abuses. The policy risks precipitating exactly the sort of human-rights disaster in Somalia as the one rightly condemned in Darfur.” It also “may well help to radicalize the region’s large and young Muslim population.” HRW points out that unlike the Sudanese government in Darfur, Ethiopia “is a key US ally and recipient of seemingly unquestioning US military, political, and financial support.”



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