

Ethiopia steps up military occupation of Mogadishu

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A brutal clampdown by the United States-backed Ethiopian forces occupying Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, has resulted in the deaths of more than 70 civilians and up to 200 wounded.

The killings were reprisals carried out since last Thursday after bodies of dead Ethiopian soldiers were dragged through the streets by Somali insurgents and their supporters. According to the BBC, Ethiopian forces fired cannon shells into an area in the south of Mogadishu, where insurgent militias are supposedly based. “Most of the dead are civilians, killed by shells fired into markets and residential areas,” said the BBC’s reporter. Hospitals are said to be overflowing with badly injured people.

Over recent weeks the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces backed by Ethiopian troops have been patrolling large areas of the city ostensibly searching for terrorists and weapons. Mogadishu Mayor Mohamed Omar Habeb called on residents to clear out of areas, notably the volatile Bakara market in southern Mogadishu, where the TFG forces intend to intensify their security sweep and “go after the insurgents”.

The United Nation’s humanitarian co-ordinator, Christian Balslev-Olesen, said there were “reports of house-to-house searches and large-scale detentions,” which have “created a climate of fear among the population not witnessed before.”

This has led to hundreds of people, including many women and children, taking to the streets wielding sticks, throwing stones, erecting burning barricades and demanding the withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces. Skirmishes have continued since the latest wave of fighting began on October 27, including attacks on two Ethiopian military bases and a number of government police posts—with two police stations burnt to the ground. Around one hundred civilians have died in fighting over the last fortnight, with some killed by troops firing on demonstrators.

The previous week insurgents also dragged the bodies of dead Ethiopian soldiers through the streets of Mogadishu with hundreds of people trailing after them, pelting the corpses with stones. It will not be lost on the Ethiopian

regime and its US advisers that dead American soldiers were dragged through the streets of the capital in 1993, after the shooting-down of two US Black Hawk helicopters, precipitating the withdrawal of US troops.

Last week Ethiopia deployed an additional six tanks and about sixty military trucks packed with troops. Fears that this will lead to a major military offensive have led to a further civilian exodus from the capital. Conditions in Mogadishu are reported to be as bad as they were when the government collapsed and civil war began in 1991. Ethiopia was supposed to be withdrawing its troops to be replaced by a UN force and claimed it had reduced its troop numbers to 6,000 from the original 10,000.

Because of the deteriorating situation in Mogadishu, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has rejected the Security Council’s request made last August for UN troops to be deployed in Somalia. Deployment of UN peacekeeping troops “cannot be considered a realistic and viable option,” he said. The UN troops were meant to replace an African Union force that was originally intended to contain 8,000 troops. So far only 1,800 Ugandan troops have been deployed. Although the TFG is officially backed by the UN—it emerged from a parliament set up by the UN in Kenya in 2004—there is little enthusiasm in African countries to support it.

The insurgents are supporters of the Islamic Courts Union that ruled Mogadishu and large parts of Somalia for the latter part of last year, winning widespread support for the relative stability they brought to the country after some 15 years of civil war. They drove out the warlords that preyed on the civilian population, many of whom are allied to the TFG.

In December last year, Ethiopian troops together with troops from the TFG drove out the Islamic Courts and attempted to impose TFG rule in Mogadishu. Ethiopia was backed by Washington, which claimed that the Islamic Courts contained Al Qaeda members and justified the invasion and subsequent atrocities on the grounds of pursuing the “war on terror”.

Opposition politicians and members of the Islamic Courts Union met in Asmara, Eritrea in September to form the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, pledging to free Somalia from Ethiopian rule. It is presumed they are backing the insurgency in Mogadishu. The Bush administration in the US is now proposing to put Eritrea on its list of sponsors of terrorism.

Even though the TFG is little more than a stooge government made up of Ethiopian and US appointees, acute divisions have developed in its ranks as the conflict with the insurgents has intensified. Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi resigned two weeks ago after coming under mounting internal and external pressure both from President Abdullahi Yusuf, who appointed him, and from Ethiopia and the US.

Gedi and Yusuf had been at loggerheads for months over several issues including the division of power, oil exploration contracts and foreign aid money. Gedi was criticised for failing to deliver a strong constituency from his own Hawiye clan—dominant in the capital Mogadishu—which has increasingly supported the insurgency. It seems it was this that led the US and Ethiopia to scapegoat Gedi and push for his ouster.

US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer has subsequently called his resignation “the right thing to do at the right time”, that it presents “an important new dynamic in Somalia and one that we all have to take very seriously”, adding that, “We should all applaud the prime minister’s willingness to move aside in the national interest.”

The TFG parliament has just approved a law that allows non-legislators to become cabinet ministers, clearing the way for the president to nominate a replacement for Gedi from beyond the ranks of the legislators. The US will push for the appointment of someone it feels is more capable of building opposition to the Islamic Courts Union.

Mogadishu residents have been fleeing the city in droves in recent months and entire districts have emptied as people have been forced from their homes. They have been arriving in massive numbers in neighbouring settlements plagued by dire food shortages—90,000 people fled fighting over a three day period recently.

“Those who are able have left the city, but many more are trapped, cannot afford to flee or are too afraid to leave Mogadishu,” reports Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). “People are fleeing into other areas of the city but are increasingly left with no safe place to seek refuge.” A high level of insecurity has prevented wounded civilians from receiving medical aid, especially those injured by shrapnel or bullets during fighting at night. “Some have bled to death as it was too dangerous to move them to hospitals,” MSF said.

About 46,000 of the latest refugees have settled along the road between Mogadishu and Afgoye town, to the west, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) said, adding to the more than 100,000 people already displaced there from fighting earlier this year. Last week saw 15 new makeshift settlements along the Afgoye road, bringing to 50 the total number of spontaneous camps lining the route.

“They are now crammed into huts and things that have sprung up all along the road. They lack food, sanitation and water—all the basic necessities of life,” explained UNHCR spokeswoman Jennifer Pagonis. “Those who arrived this weekend were hoping to go back to the capital in a matter of days, but now they see their relatives who have been here for months, they lose hope.”

The UN estimates that 1.5 million Somalis are now in need of emergency aid. The number of people displaced by fighting this year is roughly 450,000 bringing the total number of displaced persons in Somalia up to 850,000.

Paul Smith-Lomas of Oxfam said aid agencies were “extremely concerned that a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding and agencies are unable to get safe access to tens of thousands of people fleeing Mogadishu.” In an unprecedented statement, 39 aid agencies recently reported that they could not respond effectively to Somalia’s unfolding crisis due to insecurity.

There are clear signs of a possible re-emergence of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea which took place between 1998 and 2000, resulting in the death of tens of thousands. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has pointed to the fact that a huge military build up by both sides has taken place along the disputed border between the two countries. Although the Brussels-based think-tank appeals to the US and UN to intervene and halt a war, it clearly recognises that the situation has moved on from the 1990s and that the US may well support its regional proxy Ethiopia this time. “Ethiopia has played its hand skilfully, it states. “It has used its position as the major power in the region to win US toleration of its intransigence”.

The ICG suggest that Ethiopia would attempt to take over Asmara and the key port of Assab in its much smaller neighbour: “It would not be surprising if Addis Ababa believes an effort in the near future to stage a coup in Asmara, and use force against an Eritrean government that has few friends, would also be tolerated in Washington.”



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