

Somalia: growing insurgency and humanitarian crisis

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The continuing presence of United States-backed Ethiopian troops in Somalia propping up the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is provoking a growing popular insurgency and humanitarian crisis that threatens to destabilise the entire Horn of Africa.

Insurgents are now openly taking on government and Ethiopian troops in the capital, Mogadishu, and convoys are often ambushed as they move through the city. The response is invariably indiscriminate shelling and house-to-house raids.

President Abdullahi Yusuf has said that Mogadishu's civilians can either choose to fight the Islamist insurgents or consider themselves as targets in the war on terror, according to the British *Guardian*. The paper reports that the TFG is wreaking savage revenge on the population, whether or not it shelters insurgents.

The TFG has also closed down four radio stations, the key source of news in Somalia. As a result, Western governments, particularly Britain and the US, can claim a convenient degree of ignorance masking their support for the puppet regime.

The small African Union mission of Ugandan troops that supports Ethiopia and the TFG has reported that insurgents are actively fighting in 70 percent of Mogadishu's neighbourhoods. There are also signs that the resistance has spread beyond the capital, with the Islamist opponents of the TFG reportedly having taken control of two towns in the far south.

The recent upsurge comes after two weeks of fighting between insurgents and the allied Ethiopian and government troops, when scores of civilians were killed, as both sides fired shells indiscriminately into residential neighbourhoods causing a massive exodus from Mogadishu.

UN High Commission for Refugees spokeswoman Jennifer Pagonis reports that the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) within Somalia has risen sharply

to 1 million. Sixty percent of Mogadishu's population, or some 600,000 people, have fled since February this year—nearly 200,000 over the past few weeks alone—leaving entire neighbourhoods empty.

The makeshift refugee camps on the short stretch of road northwest from the capital to Afgoye now numbers more than 70, holding nearly 200,000 people, a 50 percent increase in the past few weeks. Many are forced to sleep under trees. Somalia is now in the rainy season. Many have also left behind loved ones because they were unable to afford to pay for their transport.

IDPs often have to pay landlords for a tiny patch of land to erect their shelters, and some also have to give part of the humanitarian aid they receive to self-proclaimed settlement managers. They often pay for the use of latrines.

“Many of these kids are going to die,” Eric Laroche, the head of UN humanitarian operations in Somalia, told the *New York Times*. “We don't have the capacity to reach them. If this were happening in Darfur, there would be a big fuss. But Somalia has been a forgotten emergency for years.”

Darfur is often publicised as the world's most pressing humanitarian crisis, but Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the top UN official for Somalia, believes that “The situation in Somalia is the worst on the continent.”

Recent surveys indicate that the malnutrition rate is 19 percent in the worst-hit areas, like Afgoye, whereas 15 percent is considered the emergency threshold. UN officials told the *Times* that whilst Darfur's plight attracts a billion-dollar aid operation and more than 10,000 aid workers, Somalia has received an estimated US\$200 million and is still largely considered a no-go zone for aid agencies.

“We are on a merry-go-round and it's back to 2006,” an unnamed Western military analyst told the *Guardian*, referring to the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) seizure of

control that prompted the US-led invasion. “The insurgents are gaining not only in physical strength, but in moral strength too.”

UN officials concede that the country was calmer when the UIC was in control last year. “It was more peaceful, and much easier for us to work,” said Eric Laroche.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said earlier this month that it was too dangerous to send UN troops to Somalia and instead called for a “coalition of the willing” to help the existing African Union mission. However, the UN Security Council, led by the US, has said that it will continue to plan for a peacekeeping mission despite the secretary-general’s opposition.

The November 20 *New York Times* gave a dishonest appraisal of the reasons for the Ethiopian intervention. “The Islamists were very popular, at least initially,” it admitted. “But then they overplayed their hand and declared a holy war against Ethiopia in December 2006, which provoked a crushing Ethiopian response.”

The true situation is that the US and Ethiopia sought to demonise the UIC, portraying it as a terrorist organisation, and had no intention of allowing it to remain in control. Ethiopian troops as well as CIA operatives were active in Somalia long before December.

As well as invading Somalia, Ethiopian troops have also stepped up operations in Ogaden, the province of Ethiopia that borders Somalia and has long been in conflict with Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian army launched a crackdown in the region after Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) rebels attacked a Chinese oil venture in the oil- and gas-rich region that left 77 people dead in April.

Human rights groups said the crackdown resulted in numerous human rights violations and a massive movement of refugees across the borders to Somalia and to Kenya, where the massive Dadaab camps are home to 170,000 refugees.

Harrowing testimony of Ethiopian soldiers entering villages again and again to kill, rape and burn in a campaign to flush out rebels was given by many Ogaden refugees who fled to Kenya. “The last time they attacked the village, they collected many men and took them away,” Abdi Bashi Jama told Reuters. “Some guys were hung on trees, nooses round their necks until they died...I saw it.”

In addition, the Ethiopian air force stands accused of carpet-bombing villages and nomadic settlements. “Some ONLF fighters were hurt in the air bombardments, but the air force targeted civilian settlements and livestock,” ONLF spokesman Abdirahman Mahdi said.

The Ogaden is an extremely poor, barren region about the same size as Britain with a population of about 4 million. According to the UN, more than 640,000 people in the province require urgent humanitarian assistance, with food, medical supplies and water being the main priorities. The UN has recently been allowed to supply relief food, medicine, and veterinary services, although *Medécins sans Frontières* and the International Committee for the Red Cross have both been expelled from Ogaden for allegedly meddling in politics.

The US and Ethiopia accuse neighbouring Eritrea of backing the ONLF and Islamic extremists in Somalia, both of which they designate as terrorist groups. The US government allowed Ethiopia to make emergency arms purchases from North Korea, in violation of the sanctions imposed on Pyongyang by the UN Security Council. Washington’s support for Ethiopia threatens to further destabilise the Horn of Africa, and reignite the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, which claimed more than 100,000 lives between 1998 and 2000.

For several months, Assistant US Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer has threatened to put Eritrea on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Asked recently about the issue in an interview with Voice of America, she answered, “We are still deliberating it. As I said many times before, we are putting together the case.”

Frazer’s inability to completely isolate Eritrea reflects divisions in the US administration. The United States Congress is deliberating passing a bill to cut off technical assistance to Ethiopia unless it releases political prisoners who remain in jail after the regime suppressed oppositionists in the 2005 elections. In an op-ed piece entitled, “Don’t turn on Ethiopia,” in the *New York Times*, November 15, Vicki Huddleston and Tibor Nagy, former chiefs of mission at the American Embassy in Addis Ababa, called for Congress to drop its concern for human rights violations and to “buttress Ethiopia against threats to its survival.” The proposed bill would put “Congress unwittingly on the side of Islamic jihadists and insurgents,” they claimed, calling for opposition to radical Islam’s “push to build a Muslim caliphate” in the region.



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