

# Somalia: Scores dead as Ethiopian troops push further into Mogadishu

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An upsurge in fighting in the Somali capital Mogadishu left scores dead and more than 200 wounded, as mortars and machine-gun fire rocked the city. Weeks of indiscriminate shelling have reduced the once thriving capital to rubble, with Bakara market—the city’s centre of commerce—almost flattened.

The recent fighting, in the districts of Wardhigley, Heliwa, Wahara Ade and Yaqshid, was started when Ethiopian troops, which prop up the government, moved from their base at a factory in Yaqshid and tried to enter areas not previously under their control. Hundreds of families fled and bodies remained rotting on the streets.

“The casualties...were caused by Ethiopians using heavy artillery and tank shells in residential areas of the war-torn capital. We condemn this latest fighting,” said Sudan Ali Ahmed, chairman of a local NGO, Elman Human Rights.

“What we have seen on Saturday and Sunday [April 19-20] was the worst fighting ever,” said Asha Shaur, a civil society spokeswoman. “It was the most intense and destructive the city has experienced.”

Shaur appealed to both sides of the conflict to spare the civilian population. “The indiscriminate use of heavy weapons in populated areas has one aim only—to kill as many people as possible, whether armed or unarmed,” she said. Many of the newly displaced were “more often than not” people who had returned from camps ahead of the expected rainy season, explained Shaur. “They wanted to shelter in their homes before the rains.”

The violence has swelled an already huge internal refugee problem, with the United Nations World Food Programme already feeding about 1.5 million people, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and the aid group CARE feeding many others.

The upsurge in violence comes as the country is on the brink of a severe drought. Philippe Lazzarini, the head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs-Somalia, said 2.5 million Somalis were in urgent need of assistance. “If things do not improve within the coming weeks, and it is not likely, then we will be confronted with the images of 1991-1992,” when hundreds of thousands of Somalis died through drought and violence.

Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf says civilians who have been killed in attacks by Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian troops have only themselves to blame, because they allow Islamist fighters to use their neighbourhoods to launch attacks. Yusuf also insisted that aid agencies are lying about the number of people who need humanitarian assistance, claiming that the agencies are reselling food aid.

The TFG is only able to survive with Ethiopian military backing and strong international backing from the United States and Britain. Yusuf has renewed calls for the US and the UN support to help the TFG.

Asha Haji Ilmi, head of Save Somali Women and Children, a Mogadishu-based NGO, said that the situation had never been this bad in 17 years of civil war, and that the TFG is making the humanitarian situation worse by waging an economic war in Mogadishu. “The destruction and looting of Bakara market and the printing of fake currency has led to hyperinflation,” seriously affecting the population’s ability to cope, she said.

Amnesty International has condemned an attack during the recent fighting, in which civilians were targeted at the Al Hidya mosque in Mogadishu. Eleven out of 21 people who died there were killed inside the mosque, including the Iman Sheik Saïd Yahya, Sheik Abdullah Mohamud and several Tabliq Islamic scholars.

“Eyewitnesses report that those killed inside the mosque were unarmed civilians taking no active part in hostilities,” Amnesty said. “Seven of the 21 were reported to have died after their throats were cut—a form of extra-judicial execution practiced by Ethiopian forces in

Somalia.”

Amnesty called on the Ethiopian military to release some 41 children held after this raid. “The safety and welfare of the children, some as young as nine years old, must be paramount for all parties,” it said. Amnesty was told that Ethiopian forces would only release the children from their military base in north Mogadishu “once they had been investigated” and “if they were not terrorists.”

Ethiopia’s government denied the war crimes accusations, said no raid had taken place, and that the story was propaganda circulated by al-Shabab. “This is a completely fabricated story designed to blackmail the Ethiopian army, one of the most disciplined forces anywhere in the world,” an Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman said. “It will damage the reputation of Amnesty International.”

Al-Shabab, which means “the youth” in Somali, was initially the youth wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), but is now effectively its military wing. When the UIC was driven from power in 2006 by the Ethiopian-backed TFG, many of its leaders fled to Eritrea, but al-Shabab stayed and regrouped in remote areas.

For the past 18 months, the rebels have been conducting an insurgency against the Ethiopian/Somali troops and attacking African Union peacekeepers. In the last few months, they have launched many hit-and-run raids on small towns, only to disappear before reinforcements arrive, with arms and military vehicles seized from Somali government and Ethiopian troops.

The tactic began as an attempt to stretch the Ethiopian forces supporting the TFG. But they now appear to be consolidating their hold in some areas. They have recently taken control of Bur Hakaba, near the seat of parliament in Baidoa, Dinsor and Wajid in south-central Somalia, and the southern coastal town of Guda.

The US has recently added al-Shabab to its list of “foreign terrorist organisations,” calling it “a violent and brutal extremist group with a number of officials affiliated to al Qaeda.” A senior member of al-Shabab, Sheikh Muktar Robow, told the BBC he welcomed the US decision. “Al-Shabab feels honoured to be included on the list. We are good Muslims and the Americans are infidels.”

“We are on the right path,” he said, though he rejected the US accusations that the group is linked to Al Qaeda. “We are fighting a jihad to rid Somalia of the Ethiopians and its allies, the secular Somali stooges,” he added.

For Ethiopia, the question of crushing Islamism in Somalia is linked to crushing it in its own ethnic Somali

region known as the Ogaden, where it is experiencing growing unrest, and where it has resorted to similarly brutal methods.

The Ethiopian presence, and its actions such as the attack on the mosque, is having the effect of radicalising even the more moderate factions in Somalia who are increasingly unwilling to negotiate until the Ethiopian troops have left the country. This is something of an embarrassment to Ethiopia and the US, which supported the invasion ostensibly as a means of crushing Islamic fundamentalism.

The Senlis Council, a European international policy think tank that has strongly criticised US policy in Afghanistan in the past, is equally scathing of the Bush administration’s “abject policy failures” in Somalia.

“The US is the common denominator in both countries,” said Norine MacDonald QC, the council president in a recent report. “Instead of containing the extremist elements in Somalia and Afghanistan,” she added, “US policies have facilitated the expansion of territory that al-Shabab and the Taliban have psychological control over.”

The report also observes, “The Taliban and al-Shabab are successfully exploiting policy mistakes such as aerial bombings, ongoing poverty, and aggressive foreign military presence to the extent that they are increasingly viewed by local populations as representatives of their legitimate political grievances.”

Al-Shabab has made significant gains in southern and central Somalia. “This loss of territorial control is a very serious setback for the government,” commented a local authority official in the city of Ufurow to the southwest of Mogadishu.



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