

Ethiopia threatens to withdraw from Somalia

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Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has warned that he is prepared to withdraw his country's troops from Somalia, where they are propping up the US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), even if the latter was not in control of the country.

His comments in an interview with the *Financial Times* at the end of August mark a significant shift in policy. He had previously indicated that Ethiopia would stay in Somalia until the TFG was in control of the country and well established.

He threatened that "technically we could bring them [the Ethiopian troops] back home tomorrow. We feel we have done what we planned to do in terms of preventing a total takeover of Somalia by a jihadist group."

Cobbled together in 2004, the TFG is a cabal of CIA-backed warlords infamous for looting the country over a period of nearly two decades. It is beset by internal squabbling and split along clan lines.

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) militia took control of virtually the entire country in 2006, including the capital Mogadishu, and won substantial popular support due to its offensive against the warlords and its record of establishing civil order and the provision of food and basic services.

The illegal invasion and occupation of Somalia by thousands of Ethiopian troops was organised with the full backing of the Bush administration in December 2006, and was accompanied by US Special Forces units on the ground in Somalia. The US military also supplied air and naval power to support the Ethiopian invasion force, whose mission was to overthrow the UIC.

Most Somalis resent the Ethiopian occupation, and the puppet regime which it props up. Tapping into this, the remnants of the UIC began an insurgency in early 2007, which has led to Ethiopia becoming bogged down in its own "mini-Iraq".

Washington has included the UIC, its militant wing Al Shabaab, and several other oppositionists on its terrorist list on the basis of alleged links to al-Qaeda. This provides the pretext for Washington's drive to install a client regime in Somalia, a Horn of Africa country whose 1,800 mile coast overlooks strategic shipping lanes between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean that are used for Middle Eastern oil supplies.

The US military has conducted at least five missile strikes against Somali territory since the beginning of 2007. The latest was carried out in advance of a United Nations-sponsored

meeting in Djibouti in May at which TFG officials and UIC leaders were to negotiate a possible truce.

Amnesty International reported earlier this year on the humanitarian catastrophe which has unfolded during Ethiopia's illegal occupation, where terror against the civilian population in the form of summary executions, torture, rape and arbitrary detention has become an everyday occurrence.

The report placed greatest emphasis on the actions of forces armed, financed and backed militarily and politically by the United States, i.e. the Ethiopian military and the TFG. It paints a harrowing picture of human suffering and social disintegration—the direct outcome of the illegal invasion and occupation of Somalia. It charges that the terror campaign, including the blasting of entire neighbourhoods suspected of being sympathetic to Islamist insurgents, by government and Ethiopian troops is a major factor in a humanitarian crisis that threatens millions of Somalis with starvation.

The *FT* interview with Zenawi was remarkable in that he also pointed a finger at "the international community", and therefore the US government. He complained that they had not given Ethiopia enough political and financial support for its troubles. Nor had they sufficiently backed the African Union (AU) peacekeeping force which is ostensibly due to takeover from the Ethiopians. Just 2,200 of the 8,000 proposed troops for the AU mission have so far arrived.

"Hopefully our withdrawal will come as a result of more progress in peace in Somalia and more deployment of the African Union," he said, "but given past practise we could never be sure when the African Union could deploy in any meaningful sense and so it doesn't make sense for any government to say that we have an open ended commitment until the international community, in its own good time, decides to relieve us of that responsibility."

Zenawi also complained that Ethiopia's "obligation towards peace in Somalia is only one aspect. There are also requirements of our own including financial requirements. The operation has been extremely expensive so we will have to balance the domestic pressures on the one hand and pressures in Somalia on the other and try to come up with a balanced solution."

Certainly the financial constraints of illegal occupation are real for Ethiopia, which has been hit this year by a combination of soaring inflation and failed harvests. The crisis has been

exacerbated by a number of public infrastructure investments that have left government finances severely stretched.

Ethiopia is ranked one of the 10 least developed countries in the world by the United Nations. Its food price index jumped 91.7 percent in the year to July, with staple cereals such as wheat and maize leaping 171.9 percent.

The World Food Programme said last month that an estimated 10 million people in Ethiopia out of a population of about 80 million are in need of food aid. Aid workers have criticised the government for providing subsidised wheat to low-income families in the cities, where political opposition is strongest, at the expense of rural areas where the crisis is much worse.

The Ethiopian government has nearly used up its emergency grain reserve and has started importing an extra 150,000 tonnes of wheat from Europe and North America, though this policy is fast exhausting its foreign currency reserves.

The UN and western diplomats have been pushing the “Djibouti Agreement”, which creates deadlines for the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops and the deployment of international peacekeepers. The TFG recently signed the agreement with the moderate faction of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), though Al-Shabaab and the more militant faction of the ARS remain opposed to it and are demanding the withdrawal of Ethiopians prior to any negotiation.

Attacks on Ethiopian troops and Somali security forces have risen sharply during August, with civilians continuing to take the brunt. More than 50 casualties were reported recently as a result of “indiscriminate shelling” by Ethiopian and government troops after a roadside bomb attack on a military convoy, according to the UN.

Al-Shabaab, aided by a faction of the ARS, recently took control of the southern port city of Kismayo, 500 kilometres south of the capital Mogadishu, from the warlord Barre Hirale. Islamist forces had previously captured Kismayo from Hirale in September 2006 before Ethiopia’s intervention.

Ali Bashi Abdullahi, the chairman of the Fanole Human Rights Organisation in Kismayo, said the Islamic militia was consolidating its control on the ground. “They are peacefully disarming hundreds of freelance militiamen in the city that have been causing serious security problems.” The Islamists were also holding talks with clan elders to come up with an acceptable administration for the city, he added.

Control of the port gives the Islamists effective control of the coastline all the way south to Kenya, a situation that is unacceptable to the US which is sure to respond.

The city is reported to be calm, though an estimated 35,000 people were displaced during the takeover, with 100 people dead and around 250 injured. In total, over 8,000 Somalis have been killed and more than one million forced to flee due to fighting since September last year.

Recent fighting has fuelled a fresh refugee crisis, with nearly

40,000 people this year arriving at the Dadaab settlement camp in the desert of northeastern Kenya, 60 miles south of the border with Somalia, despite the border being closed. Dadaab is now the world’s biggest refugee camp, with more than 210,000 refugees and at least 200 new arrivals every day. “We are already at bursting point,” said Maeve Murphy, field officer with the UN Refugee Agency. “And more refugees are on their way.”

A total of 3.2 million people are now affected by the crisis, up from 1.8 million people in January. The UN estimates that up to 3.5 million Somalis—nearly half the population—could need food aid by the end of this year. One out of six children under the age of five are acutely malnourished.

Mark Bowden, the UN’s Designated Official for Somalia, called the situation “probably, the most complex crisis we are dealing with in the world at the moment.”

Pirates prevent much aid arriving by sea, whilst ambushes and roadblocks severely hamper field operations. All of south and central Somalia and large parts of the north are almost completely off-limits to international staff.

The IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) agency has noted the “deafening silence from the international community” in response to attacks on displaced persons. Bowden also reported that donor response has been poor and that “only 40 percent of the Consolidated Appeal, the mechanism we have for raising money for Somalia, has been met.”

It is not wholly surprising that Somalia’s plight receives little coverage in the US and the West. A complicit media is seeking to conceal the extent of war crimes committed by US imperialism in Africa and around the world, even as new crimes are planned and perpetrated.



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