

# Plan to deploy British mercenaries in Somalia

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British mercenaries are to be deployed in Somalia, according to the London-based *Sunday Telegraph*. The *Telegraph*, which is well informed on military matters, revealed last week that the Foreign Office has been in talks with a firm that employs former members of the Special Boat Service (SBS).

The ex-SBS men will work with local warlords to take control of the coastline along the strategic shipping route that runs around the Horn of Africa. Ostensibly the plan is an anti-piracy measure responding to the kidnapping of a British couple who were travelling in the area on their yacht. In reality, it expresses the renewed drive to colonial expansion in this vital area.

The SBS is the naval version of the Special Air Service (SAS). Traditionally, the SBS has specialised in amphibious operations, but it has been used in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases the SBS has been used to capture or assassinate leading members of the resistance.

It is thought that a joint SAS/SBS squadron has been formed. The move would reflect the greater emphasis successive British governments have placed on the role of the Special Forces. They are seen as a cost effective way of increasing the UK's global reach and participating in US-led wars of aggression. While the recent UK defence review made cuts in conventional forces, it recommended increasing the funding for Special Forces. Overseas aid was also protected in the coalition government's austerity measures. This was advertised as a humanitarian measure, but the funding for the mercenary operation in Somalia will come out of the aid budget.

Drum Cussac, which claims to be "the market leader in anti-piracy and maritime security consultancy", is to supply the mercenaries. It already provides armed security for commercial vessels off the Horn of Africa and operates in the West African offshore oilfields. It is run by Jeremy Stampa Orwin, a former British army

officer who served in the Scots Guards. A previous firm he ran shared offices with Sandline International, the company that became notorious for its role in Papua New Guinea and Sierra Leone. It shipped some 35 tonnes of weapons to Sierra Leone when a United Nations arms embargo was in force. Stampa Orwin has insisted that while the two companies sometimes collaborated they were separate entities.

Sandline was established by Simon Mann and Tim Spicer, both former Scots Guards officers. Mann was imprisoned for his part in a failed coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea in which it has been alleged that former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's son, Mark, was involved. Mann was released in November 2009 on humanitarian grounds.

Many of the personnel from Sandline subsequently worked for Aegis Defence Services, which Spicer set up in 2002. Aegis won the contract to supervise all the private security services in Iraq. Effectively, Spicer was in command of the second largest armed force in Iraq. The Pentagon cleared Aegis after a video was posted on the web showing its employees firing at Iraqi civilians. Their action was found to be within the rules for the use of force by civilian contractors.

The proposed use of mercenaries in Somalia reflects a growing trend by both the US and UK to rely on private contractors in addition to their own armed forces. The experience of Iraq has shown that these firms operate entirely beyond the reach of the law and with no concern for civilian lives.

The decision to use mercenaries in Somalia reflects the impasse that has been reached. The US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has proved ineffectual. Despite armed support from an African Union force (AMISOM) the TFG has failed to gain control of the capital Mogadishu. Large parts of the country are in the hands of al Shabaab, an Islamist militia. Increasingly, European governments are

exploring the possibility of negotiating with elements in al Shabaab.

Uganda, which supplies the bulk of the troops for AMISOM, is pressing the UN to impose an air and sea blockade on Somalia that will prevent al Shabaab from shipping in weapons and exporting the commodities that pay for its military operations. The US is reluctant to take this route or to allow Uganda to increase its forces in Somalia. There is a danger that a larger African Union presence would risk antagonising Eritrea and bringing Ethiopia back into the conflict. Neighbouring Sudan is in negotiations with al Shabaab. Under these circumstances the long-running Somali conflict may become a more generalised war throughout the entire Horn of Africa region.

The British plan is an attempt to mobilise local forces that will not antagonise Somalia's neighbours. In its present straitened economic condition Britain is finding it difficult to continue to play a role on the world stage with conventional forces. But as one of the most experienced of colonial powers Britain is searching for new methods of working that will allow it to maintain its position as America's most loyal partner.



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