

US-backed forces launch military offensive in Somalia as aid is used as a weapon of war

Susan Garth
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African Union forces have launched a military offensive against the al-Shabab militia in Somalia. The African Union is propping up the Transitional Federal Government that was installed by the US-backed Ethiopian invasion of December 2006.

Somalia is currently in the middle of the worst drought in the region for 60 years. The UN officially declared a famine in parts of southern Somalia only weeks ago. Thousands of refugees have flocked to the areas of the capital controlled by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in search of food.

The pretext offered for the offensive was the need to defend famine-relief efforts. Speaking for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Lt Col Paddy Ankunda stressed the humanitarian character of the operation.

“Following a period of sustained provocation from al-Shabab, our troops have dealt with specific security threats in a short tactical offensive operation. This action will further increase security in the TFG controlled areas of Mogadishu and ensure that aid agencies can continue to operate and get vital supplies to internally displaced persons.”

He continued, “We can reassure the humanitarian community that they can continue to operate in relative safety, and that we will keep them informed of any necessary future operations while we work with them to limit the impact on their lifesaving activities.”

A spokesman for the TFG told reporters “One of the reasons that the operation was a necessity was to ensure that humanitarian aid agencies get some kind of an environment where it's safe and secure for them to operate.”

He added, “As you are aware, an al-Shabab mortar could easily land in one of those camps.”

The camps are a relatively new phenomenon in Mogadishu after years in which civilians have fled the capital to escape battles between the TFG and al-Shabab. The drought and the availability of famine relief aid in Mogadishu have forced those who cannot get over the border into Kenya to search for food in the capital.

Almost half a million people are thought to be in refugee camps in Kenya. Another 135,000 may be in Ethiopia.

A drought which has put 12 million people at risk across East Africa has become the pretext for the US to step up military

aggression through its proxy forces. The same humanitarian justification was given for the US military intervention in Somalia begun by President George Bush in 1992 under the codename Operation Restore Hope and continued by President Bill Clinton. US forces claimed to be protecting aid convoys, but terrorised the civilian population as they hunted down supposed terrorists. Since then, Somalia has become a focus for Obama's war on terror.

It seems that the US-backed forces have taken the opportunity offered by the drought and famine to extend the control of the TFG. Heavy shelling was reported in the capital Mogadishu on Thursday, July 28.

Analysts believe that the drought has weakened al-Shabab. Abdiwahab Sheikh Abdi Samed, a Somali political analyst with Southlink Consultants in Nairobi maintains that a rift has opened up between clan elders in the famine-struck areas and al-Shabab militants. It seems that the the US and its allies in the region are determined to use the drought to strike a blow against al-Shabab.

“The day's of al-Shabab are numbered,” Samed said, speaking on the US propaganda station Voice of America.

The military offensive is only one part of their strategy. Aid is itself being used as a weapon of war. Samed went on, “My biggest worry is only one thing. If the international community is allowed to provide food and water and basic necessities to the al-Shabab controlled areas, they will receive a logistical support so that they are now prolonging the fighting.”

At the same time a political campaign to identify Somali-Americans as terrorists has begun in the US. Speaking at the House Homeland Security committee, Republican Representative Peter King warned of the threat of home-grown terror.

“We must face the reality that Al-Shabab is a growing threat to our homeland,” he said.

King claimed that US counter-terrorism officials were concerned that al-Shabab “may attempt an attack here.”

Al-Shabab, he claimed “has successfully recruited and radicalized more than 40 Muslim Americans and 20 Canadians, who have joined the terror group inside Somalia.”

The picture that King and others present of the enormous strength of al-Shabab is highly misleading. In a report for the

Council of Foreign Relations, Bronwyn Bruton concluded that the group is perhaps 10,000 strong with only “several hundred of them hardcore terrorists, the rest thugs and bandits under the age of 15,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

To imagine that the strongest military power in the world is menaced by such a small outfit composed predominantly of adolescents would be absurd if it did not have such serious consequences.

“The relentless terrorism by al-Shabab against its people has turned an already severe situation into a dire one that is only expected to get worse,” US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last week.

The reality is that the “relentless terror” has come from the USA and its proxy forces in Somalia. It has recently emerged that the CIA maintains a base in Mogadishu and has conducted interrogations of prisoners snatched off the streets of Nairobi and other parts of East Africa.

Jeremy Scahill, an investigative journalist whose report on the CIA bases in Somalia was recently published in the *Nation*, spoke to the Kenyan-based *East African*. The TFG and AMISOM were attempting to take ground from al-Shabab, he said.

“But they’re not liberating those areas so people can return to them, but are instead forcing a total exodus from former Shabaab strongholds.”

Scahill based his comments on discussion with TFG and US intelligence personnel. He is undoubtedly well informed. But he was at pains to distance the US government from what he admits are the actions of its own agencies. He did not suggest that the Obama administration had any responsibility for the crimes that are being committed in Somalia. He insisted that the CIA did not have any knowledge of what was happening on the ground and was not running the day to day operation. In itself this would be surprising since the CIA admits that it pays the salaries of several TFG officials.

To deny that the TFG is a puppet government and to present AMISOM as an independent force that could operate without US finance, training and support is simply not credible. The AMISOM force is made up of troops from Burundi and Uganda, which are both close US allies and have consistently worked with the US in East and Central Africa.

More covert in their activities are the mercenary companies that have been linked to Somalia. Saracen International was reported to be negotiating with the TFG earlier this year. The company is thought to be associated with Erik Prince the founder of Blackwater, the security company that was accused of killing Iraqi civilians.

Saracen's chief operations officer was said to be the South African mercenary Lafras Luitingh. He became notorious under the Apartheid regime for his assassinations of anti-apartheid activists.

Blackwater has been renamed Xe Services since the outcry over its role in Iraq and has secured a \$100 million contract to

protect the CIA's base in Afghanistan, according to the *New York Times*.

A spokesman for Prince told the *New York Times* that he “had no financial role” in Saracen and was primarily involved in “humanitarian” and anti-piracy activities.

The humanitarian theme keeps reappearing in all statements on Somalia. Hillary Clinton announced a further \$28 million in aid to Somalia in July. The US, which contributes \$431 million in aid to the whole of the Horn of Africa, is the largest donor to the region. But Clinton specified that none of this aid should go to the areas that the US regards as being under the control of al-Shabab.

The two regions that the UN has declared to be officially in a state of famine are Bakool and Lower Shabelle. Neither are in the hands of the TFG which controls only a few square miles of Mogadishu. The implication of Clinton's statement was that the areas suffering from famine would be denied aid.

Some 3.7 million people are threatened by famine in Somalia and 2.8 million of them are in the south of the country where the TFG has no authority. Donald Steinberg, deputy administrator of USAid told a press conference in London:

“We are committed to saving lives in Somalia and we are already working in any area not controlled by al-Shabaab. Unfortunately, about 60 percent of people affected are in al-Shabaab territories.”

One could not have a clearer admission of the intention of the Obama administration to use food aid as a weapon of war in Somalia.

The East African famine is primarily a man made disaster. It is the result of the policies of the major Western governments who have poured arms into the region, creating massive instability, and of the financial oligarchy that has created food shortages by speculating in staple commodities. No effort has been made to mitigate the effects of global warming which have become more pronounced in this region from year to year.

Most of the emergency aid has come from individual donations not governments. Oxfam, one of the NGOs working in the region has identified a “\$700 million black hole in the aid effort” because of the lack of response from governments. What aid the US is giving is being used in the most cynical way as a weapon of war and as the pretext for military operations under the guise of protecting humanitarian efforts.



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