US prepares for military intervention in Somalia

Susan Garth
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The Obama administration is preparing a new military intervention in Somalia under the pretext of humanitarian concern for starving drought victims. The media has fallen into line with a campaign mixing crocodile tears and hand-wringing with denunciations of the Islamist movement al-Shabaab, which is blamed for the deepening crisis.

Just as the bombing campaign in Libya was launched with appeals to save the civilian population of Benghazi from slaughter, so now a fresh intervention is being prepared in Africa supposedly to save the starving children of Somalia. This is a cynical exercise in public deception.

Al-Shabaab is at most 10,000 strong, according to a report produced for the US Council on Foreign Relations. Its most loyal forces probably amount to only a few hundred fighters. It has no organisational connections to Al Qaeda, according to the National Counterterrorism Center.

Yet US officials blame this organisation for the present famine. “The relentless terrorism by al-Shabaab 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 declared last week.

In fact, it is Washington that has denied aid to all areas of Somalia that are not under the control of the US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), meaning that aid is restricted to a few square miles. “We are committed to saving lives in Somalia and we are already working in any area not controlled by al-Shabaab,” Donald Steinberg, deputy administrator of USAid told a press conference in London. “Unfortunately, about 60 percent of people affected are in al-Shabaab territories.”

One could not have a clearer statement of Washington’s intention to use food and famine as weapons of war against a civilian population. 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. Any agency that attempts to provide food in large parts of Somalia runs the risk of prosecution for materially assisting a terrorist organisation.

In 2009, the US forced the World Food Programme to close its feeding programmes for mothers and malnourished children on the grounds that it was assisting a terrorist organisation. The areas where the UN has officially declared a state of famine to exist have been denied food aid for the past two years.

US ally President Yoweri Museveni of neighbouring Uganda has called for a no-fly zone to be established over southern Somalia. Its purpose, he says, will to be to root out the al-Shabaab militia.

However, al-Shabaab has no air power whatsoever, nor even surface-to-air missiles. Its fighters, many of them no more than teenage boys, drive pick-up trucks.

A no-fly zone has no purpose other than to prepare the way for an invasion. General Carter F. Ham, who heads the US command for Africa, AFRICOM, has made clear that the Pentagon would welcome a no-fly zone—provided that it can be presented as a demand coming from regional powers rather than Washington. He wants the African Union to put forward the plan in the same way that the call for a no-fly zone over Libya came from the Arab League. It would be a US military operation under a false flag.

US-backed African Union forces known as AMISOM have just launched a major ground offensive against the al-Shabaab militia. Fierce fighting has been reported in Mogadishu and near the town of Elwak, in the Gedo region of southern Somalia.

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The US itself already has the capacity to strike deep into Somalia. In June this year it launched an unmanned drone assassination attack. Previously it landed Special Forces troops in helicopters to kill or seize suspects. It can launch attacks from a new CIA base in Mogadishu, from the fleet of naval vessels that patrol off the Somalia coast, or from the military base it maintains in nearby Djibouti.

Al-Shabaab, which the US claims is linked to Al Qaeda, is being presented as a major military threat to the US. Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee Peter King called al-Shabaab "a growing threat to our homeland," claiming that it was recruiting Somali-Americans for terrorism.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Karen Greenberg, executive director of the Center on Law and Security at the New York University Law School, challenged King's claims. She pointed out that only one Somali-American has been convicted of terrorist-related offences and that he had no connection to al-Shabaab.

Washington's reaction to the present famine recalls Operation Restore Hope, when, in the final days of the presidency of George Bush senior, on December 5, 1992, 30,000 US troops were sent into Somalia under the pretext of delivering food aid to starving children.

Al-Shabaab did not exist then. The supposed threat to food convoys came from "war lords" who emerged from the collapse of the Siad Barre regime. The US had since 1977 supported the military dictator Barre against the Soviet-backed Ethiopian regime. In 1991, Washington abandoned Barre and his regime collapsed. No stable government has existed in Somalia since.

President Bill Clinton continued what became ever more openly an occupation. He was forced to pull US troops out of Somalia in 1994 after an American Black Hawk helicopter was shot down in Mogadishu and the bodies of crew members were displayed before the television cameras.

Operation Restore Hope represented a new phase of colonial aggression. The US Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, condemned the supposed "humanitarian intervention at the time. It wrote: "The unleashing of tens of thousands of troops, backed by warships, jet fighters and attack helicopters, is a brutal violation of the sovereignty of the Somali people. It signals a return to the naked colonial enslavement of the oppressed peoples not only of Africa, but throughout the world."

Since then, Washington has been determined to reverse its defeat and regain control of a country that is at the heart of a new scramble for Africa, a continent rich in oil and other precious raw materials. Somalia sits at the crossroads of world trade by sea and air. Some 90 commercial flights a day cross its airspace. Sea lanes carrying oil from the Gulf and North Africa lie off its coasts. Control of Somalia is a key US goal if it is to maintain global hegemony against rivals such as China.

Washington has learned to adopt different tactics since its defeat in 1994. Increasingly it is using proxy forces in Africa. In December 2006, the US supported the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, which installed the TFG as a puppet regime. When Ethiopian troops withdrew, AMISOM replaced them. Ugandan and Burundian troops, which dominate AMISOM, have been trained by the US military and equipped with the latest hardware.

Through all these twists and turns of imperialist intrigue, however, the Workers League's characterisation of the 1992-1994 invasion of Somalia has been repeatedly vindicated. A succession of imperialist adventures, invasions and wars--in the Balkans, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and Africa—has followed, more often than not under the guise of humanitarian missions. Workers and young people must reject all attempts to manipulate public concern over the tragic famine in Somalia to pave the way for yet another brutal intervention.

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