

# UK holds international conference as major powers deepen intrigues in Somalia

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13 May 2013

Last week, British Prime Minister David Cameron hosted an international conference on Somalia, ostensibly about providing aid for security and economic development for a country ravaged by decades of war and famine and in a state of economic and political collapse.

Cameron said that Somalia had made “remarkable” progress since a similar conference held in London 15 months ago. The number of pirate attacks off Somalia’s coast had fallen dramatically, the famine had receded, the diaspora was returning and the economy was picking up. But the Al-Shabaab militants, linked to Al-Qaeda, were “still a threat to peace and security.”

Celebrations of a “new Somalia” are a political fraud. The conference was aimed at shoring up the legitimacy and providing a veneer of respectability to the new government selected—notelected—last September. The neo-colonial regime has little credibility and almost no authority outside the capital Mogadishu, and even that is limited.

The conference was attended by delegations from 50 countries and organisations, including the United States, European Union (EU), Turkey, the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and the African Union. Noticeably absent were delegates from Somaliland, which seceded from Somalia in 1991, and Puntland, which declared itself an autonomous state in 1998. Situated in the northeastern part of the country, both are backed by the Western powers and are in dispute with Somalia over territory and oil exploration rights which the two breakaway states recently sold to international oil corporations.

The conference had little concrete to say about how it was going to alleviate the dreadful poverty and social problems the country faces. Instead, it cynically endorsed a public financial management action plan for Somalia, approved by the World Bank and the G7 group of rich countries for the world’s most conflict-torn states,

whereby international financial consultants set the budgets and the financial reporting systems for up to 19 of the worst affected countries.

This is a thinly disguised attempt to put whole countries into administration under the direct control of the banks. A further conference to be held in Brussels in September will formalise the arrangements under the supervision of the EU.

Britain is setting aside 30 percent of its aid budget under this programme, providing £80 million in aid to Somalia as part of a £267 million package between 2011 and 2015. It has pledged £15 million to train Somalia’s security forces and judges. Cameron said that a number of countries had agreed to provide \$77 million, with the EU offering \$58 million, to help the government “rebuild its security forces so they could tackle insurgents and criminal networks.”

In all, donors pledged a paltry \$130 million, almost all going toward security forces. But it is unclear how much of this, if any, is new money.

Somalia’s delegation was headed by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, who was installed last August after the Transitional Federal Government’s (TFG) remit, extended for more than eight years, was not renewed despite having failed to draw up a new constitution or set in place arrangements for elections. The government was therefore appointed by so-called clan elders, who were themselves selected.

A National Constituent Assembly, appointed in a similar fashion from existing members of the corrupt UN-backed TFG, which embezzled 70 percent of the international funding it received, was charged with selecting parliamentary legislators based on the same contentious system of clan apportionment. The process was riven with bribery and corruption, including the purchase of seats for up to \$25,000. While some warlords were deselected, many of the corrupt figures in office

since the US-backed Barre dictatorship fell 22 years ago were reinstated.

The parliament was inaugurated at Mogadishu's international airport, the only moderately safe location, thanks to the presence of a contingent of African Union troops. It chose Mohamud, a former academic from one of the four main clans, the Hawiye, as president. Close to the Muslim Brotherhood, he recently established its political arm, the Peace and Development Party.

Mohamud heads a state entirely dependent on international aid and 18,000 African Union troops, under the auspices of the UN's AMISOM mission since 2007, whose budget is largely covered by the EU, as well as troops from Kenya and Ethiopia.

With Kenya home to Somali refugees and fearing the spread of the insurgency over its border, it is seeking to annex part of Somalia's southern territory to create a protectorate, to be known as Jubaland. It has sponsored its own proxy militia, the Ras Kamboni, whose leaders split from Al-Shabaab seeking an autonomous region.

Last autumn, Kenya's military forces recaptured the southern port city of Kismayo, supposedly the last stronghold of Al-Shabaab, an Islamist group that formally merged with Al-Qaeda and has received funding from Saudi Arabia. The reality is that the militants simply withdrew to launch a guerrilla war and attacks on the city. Only two days after Mohamud became president, he faced an assassination attempt by an Al-Shabaab suicide bomber.

Mogadishu is never free from violent attacks. Last month two blasts, including one outside the Supreme Court, left more than 30 people dead. Last week a powerful blast in the commercial and administrative centre of the city killed 11 people.

The country has been devastated by more than two decades of civil war and foreign interventions. One million people have been internally displaced and more than a million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

According to a recent UN report, more than 260,000 people died in the famine of 2011-12, half of them children under five. This was even more than the number that perished in the famine of 1992. More than 2.6 million are in need of life-saving assistance. While the region suffered one of the worst droughts in over 50 years in the whole of Africa, Oxfam attributed the deaths to "catastrophic political failure."

Britain, as the former colonial power in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and breakaway Somaliland, has played a major role

in Somalia due to its desire to secure its share of the region's natural resources. London has been pushing for the government to accept autonomy for about half a dozen of Somalia's fiefdoms, each with different regional backing. This would be in addition to the breakaway states of Somaliland and Puntland that are not internationally recognized, and would cantonise the country.

The US has recognised the new government. Last month, the IMF followed suit but since Somalia owes the Fund \$352 million this will not bring new funding. The UN partially lifted its arms embargo, its oldest international arms blockade, sanctioning the supply of small arms to the new government. Britain has just reopened its embassy in Mogadishu, the first EU country to do so. However, it was Turkey that took the lead in recognising Somalia in November 2011 and organising a state visit by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The turn by the major and regional powers to Somalia is made in an effort to counter the influence of their rivals, most notably China. Somalia has a more than 1,000-mile long coastline opposite Yemen on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, through which 23,000 ships transit every year carrying nearly \$1 trillion worth of trade, most crucially oil, to and from Europe.

In addition to its own potential oil resources, Somalia's strategic position places it at the heart of a projected pipeline network to bring oil from South Sudan to the soon-to-be expanded Kenyan port of Lamu, south of the border with Somalia. Another pipeline would link it to an oil refinery in Kampala, Uganda, which has recently started producing oil. A further pipeline will link the Kenyan capital Nairobi with Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, providing Ethiopia with another export route for oil from the Ogaden region bordering Somalia.



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