

Kenya: Islamist militia attacks Nairobi's Westgate mall, killing 68

Alex Lantier**23 September 2013**

Gunmen assaulted the upscale Westgate mall in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi over the weekend, killing 68 and wounding 200 in an attack claimed by Somalia's Al Qaeda-linked Al Shabab militia. Kenyan security forces surrounded and repeatedly attacked the gunmen, who took 36 hostages and as of this writing continue to hold out inside sections of the mall.

The Westgate attack came amid an international wave of Taliban or Al Qaeda-linked bombings, including a string of car bombings in southern Yemen Friday and yesterday's church bombing in northwestern Pakistan. (See: "Suicide-bomb attack on Christian church kills 80 in Pakistan")

The Nairobi attack began Saturday around noon, when 10 to 15 gunmen armed with automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades attacked the mall, one of Nairobi's main luxury shopping centers, well known to international visitors. Shoppers who escaped said the attackers, including both women and men, shot accurately and seemed highly trained.

While Kenyan forces secured the top floors of the mall Saturday evening, fighting on lower floors continued throughout the weekend. Many people were trapped in the mall until Sunday. Shopper Cecile Ndwiga told the BBC, "the shootout was all over—left and right."

Several Kenyan soldiers were reportedly killed by grenade fire yesterday while storming the mall's Nakumatt supermarket.

A Kenyan security official told AFP that Israeli forces had also entered the mall and were "rescuing the hostages and the injured." Security forces at the mall, which is in part Israeli-owned, were reportedly also receiving assistance from US and British advisors.

Yesterday afternoon, Kenyan army and police forces backed by helicopters began a renewed assault around 4

p.m. Last night there were reports of powerful explosions in Nairobi, as officials announced they were launching a "final assault" on the mall.

Victims killed in the attack included Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor; Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta's nephew Mbugua Mwangi and his fiancée, Rosemary Wahito; Peruvian doctor and former UNICEF official Juan Jesús Ortiz; and citizens of South Africa, Britain, France, China, India, South Korea, and Canada. Four US citizens were injured.

A Twitter account belonging to the Al Shabab militia claimed responsibility for the attacks. It claimed the attacks were retribution for the invasion of Somalia by Kenyan troops—supported by the United States, including US drone strikes. This intervention aimed to fight Al Shabab and support Somalia's corrupt Transitional Federal Government. (See: "US-backed Kenyan forces invade Somalia")

Before the Twitter account was shut down, it posted several messages, such as: "The attacks are just retribution for the lives of innocent Muslims shelled by Kenyan jets in Lower Jubba and in refugee camps ... For long we have waged war against the Kenyans in our land, now it's time to shift the battleground and take the war on their land."

It also posted a message blaming the Kenyan government, which it said had "turned a deaf ear to our repeated warnings and continued to massacre innocent Muslims in Somalia."

Al Shabab military operations spokesman Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab told Reuters: "We have been fighting Kenyan forces for two years ... If Uhuru wants peace from us, he should withdraw his troops from Somalia."

UN officials had reportedly warned Kenyan officials of the threat of "attempted large-scale attacks" in

Kenya. Last week, Nairobi police broke up a plot in “advanced stages” of planning by terrorists located in the Somali neighborhood of Eastleigh, and armed with grenades, AK-47 assault rifles, and suicide vests stuffed with ball bearings.

Journalists in Nairobi reported the city was in a state of shock at the horrific scale of the killings. With blood supplies running low at the city’s hospitals, thousands of people lined up to donate blood.

Kenyan officials appealed for calm and national unity during the siege of the Westgate mall, six years after inter-ethnic massacres claimed 1,000 lives and displaced 600,000 after the disputed 2007 elections.

Citing the necessity of staying to oversee the Westgate siege, Kenyan officials said Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto, who face trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their role in inciting the 2007 killings, would not attend this week’s UN General Assembly. They were due to speak at the UN, as part of the African Union’s effort to dismiss the ICC charges against them.

“Whereas very important multilateral and bilateral meetings had been planned for President Kenyatta during the week, including a speech to the General Assembly, we very much regret that he cannot be out of the country at the same time as the Deputy President,” Kenya’s Permanent UN Representative Machariah Kamau told UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon.

The horror of the Westgate attack underscores the criminal character of the support offered by the United States government and its allies to Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias in Syria. These forces have carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks in that country, according to US officials, killing large numbers of innocent civilians.

The rise in support from Washington and its allied Persian Gulf sheikhdoms to Al Qaeda-linked forces internationally, first in the 2011 Libya war and now in Syria, has set the stage for more attacks and new, catastrophic “blowback” against civilian targets. Already, on September 11, 2012, Islamist forces in Libya who seized control of portions of Benghazi during the NATO war attacked US installations, killing US diplomat Christopher Stevens.

The rise in Al Qaeda-linked attacks globally comes less than two weeks after the Obama administration, facing deep popular opposition and the threat of a

military clash with Iran and Russia, postponed a war with Syria to support Al Qaeda-linked opposition forces. This has led to expectations of talks between the United States, Syria, and Syria’s allies Iran and Russia at the UN. These talks are bitterly opposed by Syria’s Islamist opposition, which faces defeat.

Whether the Kenyan attacks are a response to the postponement of the Syrian war, or an attack driven by local objectives and facilitated by rising international funding and political support for Al Qaeda in the context of the war in Syria, is still unclear. However, US officials are acting on the assumption that Al Qaeda-linked forces may mount further retaliatory attacks aimed at UN talks.

MSNBC reported yesterday that, in response to the Nairobi attack, New York City law enforcement agencies are boosting security in Manhattan ahead of this week’s UN General Assembly meeting.



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