Obama hails Ethiopian regime as US proxy in “war on terror”

Bill Van Auken
28 July 2015

On the second leg of his trip to Africa, President Barack Obama appeared on a joint platform with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, paying tribute to his repressive regime as a principal US proxy in Washington’s “war on terror.”

The American president has used the trip to promote an escalation of this proxy war, directed in the first instance against the Islamist fighters of al Shabaab in Somalia. Ethiopia, Africa’s second most populous nation, boasts one of the continent’s strongest militaries. It has played a principal role in this war since first sending its army into neighboring Somalia between 2006 and 2009 and then again in 2011, first to overturn a moderate Islamist regime and then to suppress resistance from al Shabaab and other Islamist militants.

Since then, Ethiopia has provided a large portion of the foreign African troops propping up the US-backed regime in Somalia, as well as sending soldiers for “peace-keeping” forces elsewhere on the continent. It also granted the US use of a secret drone warfare base on its territory.

In a press conference after talks with Prime Minister Hailemariam, Obama praised the Ethiopian regime as an “outstanding partner” in the terror war, while referring to Hailemariam’s government as “democratically elected.”

In last May’s general elections, Hailemariam’s ruling Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which has maintained a grip on power for a quarter century, won every single one of the 546 seats in the country’s parliament, in what was widely denounced as a rigged vote staged by the one-party state. Large numbers of opposition supporters were rounded up, jailed and beaten in the run-up to the balloting, while a reported 190 people were massacred by security forces in protests over the sham election.

Amnesty International has denounced the Ethiopian regime for the systematic repression of journalists, the suppression of Muslim and other minority populations and the routine torture of political prisoners. All of these acts of repression are justified in the name of the so-called war on terror promoted by Washington.

Obama, who has delivered vague homilies about the importance of “democracy” and “human rights” in Africa, avoided, as he did in his previous stop in Kenya, any direct criticism of the Ethiopian regime. Instead, he bluntly spelled out what Washington values in the regime in Addis Ababa: “We don’t need to send our own Marines in to do the fighting. The Ethiopians are tough fighters.”

Absent in the Ethiopian capital were any of the enthusiastic crowds who welcomed Obama to Kenya, the country of his father. Unlike in Kenya, the Hailemariam regime was not compelled to significantly intensify its security, which is already that of a police state. The attitude of the population, over half of which lives in desperate poverty, appeared to be one of sullen indifference.

The *Washington Post* reported Sunday that with his trip, Obama had “committed the United States to an intensified fight against terrorists in East Africa,” announcing that “his administration would expand support for counterterrorism operations in Kenya and Somalia, including increased training and funding for Kenya’s security forces.” This year, Washington has already more than doubled the amount of military and security aid it provides Kenya, to $100 million.

Troops armed and aided by the Pentagon have carried out wholesale repression and atrocities in both Kenya and Ethiopia. Last April, Kenyan security forces rounded up some 3,000 ethnic Somalis and Muslims,

© World Socialist Web Site

imprisoning many of them in a Nairobi football stadium for days. Obama's decision to deliver a speech at the same stadium during his visit shocked and outraged members of the country's Somali community, which numbers over 2 million.

Even before the African trip began, Obama's national security adviser Susan Rice told reporters that "counterterrorism will certainly be a focus." The Horn of Africa is of particular importance to Washington in terms of its struggle for control of strategic oil reserves in neighboring countries and its command of the sea route through the narrow Bab al-Mandeb straits, through which much of Europe's oil passes.

Obama also used his trip to Ethiopia to meet with African officials to discuss the bloody civil war that has raged in South Sudan for the past year and a half. The country, which was the product of a secessionist drive sponsored by Washington in an attempt to wrest territory away from Sudan, a key oil supplier to China, has seen tens of thousands killed and many more turned into homeless and hungry refugees, in a catastrophe of US making.

US officials cautioned against any expectation of a breakthrough in terms of a negotiated settlement of the conflict, but the US is determined to exploit it as a means of furthering its influence on the African continent.

This struggle for domination is directed ultimately against China, which as early as 2009 outstripped the US in terms of total trade with Africa. Since then, China's trade with the continent has grown steadily, while that of the US has declined from $125 billion four years ago to just $70 billion in 2014—one-third of the trade volume between China and Africa.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Addis Ababa, where the city's new subway line as well as the new headquarters of the African Union, where Obama was to speak, have been built by Chinese firms, along with roadways, dams and railways.

While trailing China in terms of economic influence, Washington aims to compensate by increasing military intervention.

The Chinese government has paid close attention to Obama's trip, and its official press has posted articles pointing to its underlying motives.

The trip, according to the *Global Times* newspaper, was aimed at "offsetting China's growing influence in this continent and recovering past US leverage."

It attributed Washington's "nervous" reaction to China's ascendancy to "the remnants of colonialism" and declared "the US obviously lacks a consistent African policy." The paper concluded, "Let's hope Washington plays its cards fair and square, and does not make the land an arena for great power rivalry."

The reality is that the trip to Africa, all the talk about a "homecoming" for Obama notwithstanding, is inextricably bound up with Washington's so-called "pivot to Asia" and the preparations for global military conflict aimed at imposing US imperialist domination.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site