

US airstrike massacres 150 at al-Shabaab training camp in Somalia

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US military airstrikes launched in Somalia over the weekend killed more than 150 people. The attack took place at what the US Pentagon yesterday said was an al-Shabaab training camp about 120 miles north of the country's capital, Mogadishu.

The strikes mark a significant escalation of US operations in the Horn of Africa, a region that borders the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a critical oil passageway that links the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

The airstrikes, carried out on Saturday against the Al Qaeda-affiliated group that controls parts of northern Somalia, are the deadliest in Africa in years. Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook asserted without providing evidence that the targets were graduating from the Raso training camp and posed an "imminent threat" to the US and US-backed African military forces in Somalia.

The Pentagon also claimed that there were no civilian casualties, though it would categorize anyone at the location as by definition a terrorist or military target. Those killed, according to an official cited by the *New York Times*, were "standing outside in formation" when a combination of drones and manned airplanes destroyed the camp and killed almost everyone present.

The Pentagon said that it had been monitoring the camp for weeks prior to the strike.

The attack on the training camp follows a years-long campaign of drone strikes in the impoverished North African country targeting individual leaders of al-Shabaab. In December of last year, a drone strike assassinated what the US said was one of the organization's leaders, Abdirahman Sandhere, and two other individuals.

The strikes against the training camp indicate that the Obama administration is expanding its undeclared war in the Horn of Africa, aimed at bolstering the position

of the corrupt regime of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, based in Mogadishu. In recent months, al-Shabaab has carried out a series of attacks on Somali forces and those of a coalition of African countries that is backing the government with the support of the US.

Al-Shabaab has also carried out a number of terrorist attacks, including a January 22 suicide bombing and shootout at a restaurant in Mogadishu that killed 25 people.

While implemented under the framework of the "war on terror," the main interests of the US in the region lie in Somalia's geostrategic location. The country's northern coast lies along the Gulf of Aden, which connects the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. On the other side of the Gulf of Aden lies Yemen, where the US has backed a brutal Saudi-led bombing campaign that began in the spring of last year.

Just to the northwest of Somalia lies Djibouti, where the US has its only permanent military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, the center of its drone operations throughout the continent. The water pathway between Djibouti and Yemen, known as the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, is listed by the US Energy Information Association as one of the major global oil transit choke points. Some 3.8 billion barrels of oil and petroleum products were transported through the strait in 2013, including much of the oil exported from the Persian Gulf to Europe and the US.

More broadly, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a key access point to the Indian Ocean, which now includes the most significant global trade routes, connecting Europe and the Middle East to Asia, including China.

In addition to the US, Britain has also taken a recent interest in the region, announcing last October that it was sending hundreds of troops to Somalia and South Sudan.

In their determination to retain control of the Horn of Africa, the major imperialist powers have stoked a series of civil wars and internal conflicts between different tribal and national factions. The population has been left to destitute poverty. Somalia, which has a population of more than 10 million people, has a gross domestic product per capita of just \$112 and a life expectancy of 52 years. Some 1.1 million people are internally displaced.

Al-Shabaab itself arose out of factions of the Islamic Courts Union, which gained control of Mogadishu in 2006 after 15 years of civil warfare, before being toppled at the end of the year by an Ethiopian invasion orchestrated by the US. In 2007, the US backed the formation of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), comprised of about 22,000 troops from Kenya, Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

After al-Shabaab launched an offensive against Mogadishu in 2010, AMISOM forces, again backed by the US, responded with a campaign that eventually drove the organization out of the capital and from the southern portions of the country. This was followed by regular drone strikes targeting the organization's leaders.

The operations in Somalia are part of a broader escalation throughout northern Africa, overseen by the US military's Africa Command and aimed largely at countering the growing influence of China on the continent. In recent months, the Obama administration has announced the deployment of troops and Special Operations forces to both Cameroon and Mali, and the US and European powers are also preparing for a major military escalation in Libya.



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