US escalating covert war in Somalia

Jordan Shilton
17 October 2016

The Obama administration has covertly deployed hundreds of US troops to Somalia to wage a secret war in the impoverished East African country alongside private contractors and soldiers from African allied states, a *New York Times* article revealed Sunday.

Under the pretext of protecting US and African troops from terrorists in the al-Shabaab Islamist militia, the Obama administration has authorized the use of air strikes in the country.

As the *Times* bluntly noted, the mission, which is referred to in military circles as the "Somalia campaign," has several hundred troops in the country at any one time and is "a blueprint for warfare which President Obama has embraced and will pass along to his successor. It is a model the United States now employs across the Middle East and North Africa—from Syria to Libya—despite the President's stated aversion to "boots on the ground" in the world's war zones."

The revelation, coming just days after government officials informed the public that the US had launched missile strikes in Yemen, demonstrates that the Obama administration has dragged the American people into yet another war without even a semblance of public debate.

The Somalia operations come on top of large-scale military interventions in Afghanistan, where US military forces have been waging war since 2001; Syria, where Washington is backing Islamist extremists to overthrow the Russian-backed Assad regime; and Libya, where US Special Forces have been deployed and air strikes have been carried out since August under the pretext of targeting the Islamic State.

In total, the *Times* notes that the US military has carried out air strikes in seven countries this year and special forces operations in "many more."

The US is waging war in Somalia in support of the shaky Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which barely controls territory outside of the capital, Mogadishu. The regime was only able to establish itself following a brutal US-backed invasion by neighboring Ethiopia and thanks to ongoing support from African Union (AU) soldiers.

Between 200 and 300 US Special Forces under the control of Africom (African Command) collaborate regularly with Somali National Army units and soldiers from Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti and Kenya to plan and conduct ground operations against al-Shabaab.

According to Obama's semi-annual briefing to Congress on foreign military operations, the US forces are not only present to target al-Shabaab, which is aligned with al-Qaida, but also to provide "advise and assist" support to regional counter-terrorism efforts. This has been one of the favored formulations to justify the deployment of US soldiers to war zones around the world, such as in Iraq, where the alleged advisers frequently operate on the front line in fighting against ISIS.

Africom has repeatedly dismissed reports that its frequent air strikes, including at least 13 this year, have led to civilian casualties. In one of the most recent incidents Africom denied claims by officials in the autonomous region of Galmudug that a US drone strike killed 22 local soldiers and civilians last month in the city of Galkayo.

Even strikes authorized to support offensive operations launched by Somali forces in conjunction with US soldiers are routinely labelled as "self-defense" actions.

Significantly, the US forces are not only fighting but also engage in joint interrogation sessions with Somali forces. Ominously recalling the methods employed in Afghanistan and Iraq, where US troops worked hand-in-glove with local authorities guilty of torture and abuse of prisoners, the *Times* merely noted in passing that after such sessions, US forces hand over prisoners to be interned in Somali prisons.

The suggestion that the US war in Somalia is defensive is absurd. Control over the strategically-important country, which lies adjacent to some of the most important sea lanes in the world for the transportation of oil and other commodities, is seen as essential by the US ruling elite if Washington is to retain its global hegemonic position.

© World Socialist Web Site

The *Times'* attempt to cast the catastrophic conditions in Somalia, which has not had a functioning government for over two decades, as the result of the actions of the al-Shabaab Islamist militia is highly disingenuous. In truth, the US bears chief responsibility for the more than a quarter century of bitter fighting and endemic poverty that has gripped the strategically-located country in the Horn of Africa.

In 1991, Washington withdrew its longstanding support for the regime of Siad Barre, leading to its collapse. It then seized on a famine crisis to legitimize the deployment of 30,000 troops to the country in a bid to establish a US client regime. After the Battle of Mogadishu, in which 18 US soldiers were killed, President Clinton withdrew the troops.

But the US withdrawal did not mean it remained on the sidelines. In the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration established the first permanent US military base in Africa in neighboring Djibouti, from where air strikes and drone operations have been flown.

In 2006, the US played a key role in backing an Ethiopian invasion to topple the moderate Islamic Courts regime, which had ousted the US-backed TFG. The ensuing fighting killed tens of thousands, and the brutality of the Ethiopian occupiers fueled increased support for al-Shabaab. The invasion included more than a week-long shelling campaign against Mogadishu, which reduced large parts of the capital to rubble and turned hundreds of thousands into refugees. US air strikes and naval bombardments were organized to back Ethiopia's military operations.

After capturing Mogadishu and reinstating the TFG, the Ethiopian force was supplemented by troops from Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti and Burundi under the auspices of an African Union "peacekeeping" mission.

US "advisers" were in Somalia almost without interruption from 2006. It only came to light in 2014 that around 120 US soldiers had been operating there since 2007, first alongside the Ethiopian invasion and later as part of the AU mission.

US operations in Somalia are only part of a vastly expanding array of military deployments organized by Africom across the continent.

In an annual briefing to the Senate Armed Services Committee, it was noted earlier this year that in fiscal year 2015, Africom "conducted 75 joint operations, 12 major joint exercises, and 400 security cooperation activities." As well as its permanent military base in Djibouti, the US military has drone bases in Uganda, Seychelles, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan and Niger.

The dramatic expansion of US military activity in Africa since Africom was established in 2007 reflects Washington's determination to subjugate the resource-rich continent, consolidate its geostrategic and economic hegemony and block the emergence of its rivals in Africa, above all China but also the European imperialist powers, which are seeking to reestablish domination over their former colonial possessions.

The ever more aggressive character of the operations conducted by Africom was demonstrated earlier this year with the appointment of General Thomas Waldhauser as its new commander. The four-star Marine Corps general has led US operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

During an appearance in front of the Armed Services Committee, Waldhauser vowed to expand the "war on terror" throughout Africa and stated he would request the authority to carry out targeted killings without presidential approval.

One area of major focus for Africom is the Sahel region south of the Sahara. US forces have been deployed to Cameroon and Niger, where they have been engaged in training the country's armed forces using the pretext of combatting the terrorist group Boko Haram.

The Intercept reported two weeks ago based on secret documents obtained via a Freedom of Information request that the Obama administration is planning to spend an additional $100 million to establish a new drone base which will be capable of hosting MQ-9 Reaper drones, which are larger and considered more lethal than the notorious Predator drones used to rain death and destruction down on thousands throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Just days before the *Times* revealed the covert operations in Somalia, the US military newspaper *Stars and Stripes* confirmed that a fleet of F16 fighters have been deployed in Djibouti since July in preparation for a possible "crisis response" mission in South Sudan.

The country, which gained its independence from Sudan in 2011 with Washington's backing, has substantial energy resources and is crucial to the US strategy of preventing expanding Chinese influence. But it has been gripped by civil war almost since its independence.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site