

Record pace of drone strikes mark sharp escalation of US war in Somalia

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US AFRICOM on Monday conducted a drone strike near the village of Mubaarak, some 40 miles southwest of Somalia's capital city, Mogadishu. In a press release after the attack, AFRICOM spokesperson Robyn Mack claimed the strike was conducted in support of the US-backed Somali Federal Transitional Government (FTG), and targeted Al-Shabaab Islamist militants. According to Mack, the strike killed two militants and wounded three others, along with destroying a vehicle.

Monday's strike was the ninth such attack this year, marking a sharp escalation of the US war in Somalia and putting 2018 on track to overtake the total reached in 2017 of 35 drone strikes. By comparison, 13 strikes were carried out 2016, and 5 in 2015. The 35 strikes conducted in 2017 outnumber all previous years since the American air war began in Somalia in 2007.

While 2017 marked a sharp expansion of AFRICOM's offensive in Somalia, in the first months of 2018 the Trump administration is making clear that it plans an even more dramatic and deadly offensive in the impoverished country. Since the beginning of 2018, US air strikes have killed at least 22 across Somalia. The number of deaths is certainly higher, but the precise figure is unknown as AFRICOM has only provided press releases of six of the nine attacks.

In April 2017, shortly after taking office, Trump increased the number of troops deployed to the country and issued new rules of engagement which essentially constitute open-ended warfare in the Horn of Africa. The loosening of restrictions which were in place to ostensibly protect the civilian population grants broad autonomy for American forces to carry out massacres without accountability.

With AFRICOM's announcement in November of expanded troop deployments to the country, Robyn Mack stated, "[The larger] advise and assist mission [is

now] the most significant element of our partnership [in Somalia]."

Making clear the Pentagon's intentions in Somalia, retired Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, who headed AFRICOM until June, told Politico, "We had to put more small teams on the ground to partner in a regional way with the Somali government. So we changed our strategy and we changed our operational approach. That's why the footprint went up."

Currently, the American military footprint in Somalia is the largest since 1993, when then President Bill Clinton deployed a contingent of special forces to Mogadishu to defeat the insurgency of Mohamed Farrah Aidid. One ensuing battle resulted in 19 US personnel killed, with scores more wounded.

In 2017, the number of US soldiers deployed to Somalia increased to 500, with dozens of special forces personnel consisting of Green Berets, Navy Seals, and Army Rangers. The US military contingent is augmented by a 22,000-strong African Union force made up of soldiers from several African countries, including Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

Nearly three decades of US-instigated wars have completely devastated Somalia, currently among the world's most impoverished nations, with a poverty rate of 73 per cent.

As a consequence of these conflicts, vital infrastructure such as sanitary water facilities and health care services are virtually non-existent, particularly in areas outside of Mogadishu, and the spread of treatable diseases is rampant. An estimated 60 per cent of Somali children do not have access to education. Compound this social crisis, the historic famine currently sweeping through the country has left more than 6 million people, half the population, in dire need of water and food.

The US-backed government has virtually no popular support anywhere in the country, and indeed, a majority of the population views the puppet regime with hostility. As a measure of this lack of popular support, the FTG is made up of a number of wealthy Somali-American technocrats educated in Europe and the United States, and largely performs governmental functions outside the country in neighboring Djibouti.

Underlying the conflict is the geostrategic importance of the Horn of Africa for the dominance of American imperialism in the region. Somalia fronts the Gulf of Aden, a major waterway for the world's oil traffic flowing from the Persian Gulf.

Also to be considered is the growing influence of China, which has emerged over the last decade as an economic rival for Africa's vast resources, with Beijing expanding its economic influence across the continent. Washington is mobilizing its military power to offset China's economic influence.

Causing no small amount of consternation for Washington, last August Beijing opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti, just five miles from Camp Lemonnier, the American military base operated jointly with France.

After Washington expressed its dismay toward the base as a threat to its longstanding military dominance over the Horn of Africa, Beijing downplayed any military significance of the base, declaring the facility's operations are more of "logistical" character.

While China is not an imperialist power, the establishment of a military base in defense of its economic interests on the African continent represents nothing less than a direct challenge to the dominance of US imperialism on the continent, which could lead to the outbreak of all-out war between the two nuclear-armed countries.



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