

Amnesty International denounces war crimes by US-backed forces in Somalia

By Barry Grey
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Amnesty International, the London-based human rights organization, issued a report Tuesday documenting widespread atrocities against Somali civilians by Ethiopian occupation forces and troops of the US-backed Somali government.

The report, entitled "Routinely Targeted: Attacks on Civilians in Somalia," presents a harrowing picture of a humanitarian disaster compounded by terror against the civilian population in the form of summary executions, torture, rape and arbitrary detention.

While the report says all sides in the civil war have carried out crimes against civilians, it places greatest emphasis on the actions of forces armed, financed and backed militarily and politically by the United States—the Ethiopian military and the Transitional Federal Government. (TFG).

The Amnesty International report includes interviews with Somali refugees who describe Ethiopian and TFG troops routinely slitting the throats of civilians, carrying out gang-rapes, conducting house-to-house searches in the war-devastated capital Mogadishu and summarily killing residents, and blasting entire neighborhoods suspected of being sympathetic to Islamist insurgents.

The rights organization charges that the terror campaign by government and Ethiopian troops is a major factor in a humanitarian catastrophe that threatens millions of Somalis with starvation. In the concluding section of the report, Amnesty writes:

"There is a dire human rights situation in southern and central Somalia, which has largely contributed to the current humanitarian emergency. One million Somalis are internally displaced; hundreds of thousands are newly displaced refugees; journalists and human rights defenders fear each day for their lives and many are fleeing the country; some 6,000 civilians were killed in attacks in 2007; and the entire population of Mogadishu carries the scars of having witnessed or experienced egregious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. In addition, all parties to the conflict have committed human rights violations or abuses, which included unlawful killings, extrajudicial executions, torture and other ill-treatment, including rape and beatings, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances."

The rights group had recently accused Ethiopian forces of killing at least 21 people, seven of whom had their throats slit, inside a Mogadishu mosque on April 19.

This nightmare of human suffering and social disintegration is the outcome of the illegal invasion and occupation of Somalia by tens of thousands of Ethiopian troops, prepared and launched with the full backing of the US government, in December of 2006. The US military supplied air and naval power to support its proxy Ethiopian invasion force, as well as Special Forces units on the ground in Somalia, in

order to topple the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), whose militia had taken control of virtually the entire country, including Mogadishu, leaving the US- and United Nations-backed Transitional Federal Government isolated in its enclave of Baidoa.

The US defends its role in the invasion and its ongoing military support for the Ethiopian occupation as part of the "war on terror," accusing the ICU of links to Al Qaeda. This, in fact, is a pretext for Washington's drive to install a client regime in a Horn of Africa country whose 1,800 mile coast overlooks strategic shipping lanes between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean that are used for Middle Eastern oil shipments.

The TFG is led by CIA-backed clan warlords who had earned the hatred of the Somali people for looting the country over a period of nearly two decades. The ICU, based on Islamic courts, businessmen and local and regional officials, had won substantial popular support by virtue of its offensive against the warlords and its record in establishing civil order and the provision of food and basic services.

Since the December, 2006 invasion, the TFG and Ethiopian occupation forces have failed to secure control over any significant part of Somalia, including Mogadishu. Instead, an insurgency led by Islamist forces linked to the ICU, such as the Shabaab militia, has gained strength.

Amnesty International reported there was a marked increase in executions of civilians by Ethiopian troops in the last two months of 2007. The rise appeared, in part, to have been in retaliation for an ambush of Ethiopian soldiers in early November in which the bodies of several Ethiopians were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.

The human rights group said it obtained scores of reports of killings by Ethiopian troops in which Somali civilians were, according to witnesses, "slaughtered like goats."

"The people of Somalia are being killed, raped, tortured. Looting is widespread and entire neighborhoods are being destroyed," Michelle Kagari, Amnesty's deputy director for Africa, said in a statement from Nairobi that accompanied the report.

The report quotes testimony from some 75 witnesses as well as scores of workers from non-governmental organizations. In one testimony, Haboon, 56, says her neighbor's 17-year-old daughter was raped by Ethiopian troops. The girl's brothers tried to defend their sister, but the soldiers beat them and gouged their eyes out with a bayonet.

Amnesty reports that "a young child's throat was slit by Ethiopian soldiers in front of the child's mother."

The report quotes Butaaco, aged 30, who fled Mogadishu in October 2007, as saying: "I saw girls get raped in my neighborhood and on the streets. I saw people get slaughtered. I saw people killed in their

houses, their bodies rotting for days. It happened to my neighbor's two girls."

In another account, a witness named only as Ceebla'a says she saw Ethiopian soldiers rounding up three men, whose bodies were found in the street the next morning. One had been strangled with an electrical wire, another had his throat cut, while the third had been chained ankle to wrist, his testicles smashed.

Not surprisingly, the Amnesty International report has received little coverage in the American media, and no mention by any of the presidential contenders of the two major political parties. Just as the political and media establishment has sought to cover up the scale of the mass killing and destruction in Iraq, it is intent on concealing from the American people another immense war crime committed by US imperialism.

The release of the report coincided with the second day of protests in Mogadishu against soaring food prices. On Monday, government troops fired into tens of thousands of people who marched and rioted to demand that food traders accept old 1,000-shilling notes. At least two demonstrators were killed and several others were wounded.

The protesters, including many women and children, jammed the narrow streets of the bombed-out capital, shouting, "Down with those suffocating us!"

"First we have been killed with bullets, now they are killing us with hunger," said Halima Omar Hassan, a demonstrator who works as a porter, carrying goods for people on her back.

In Mogadishu, the price of corn meal has doubled since January. Rice has increased to \$47.50 from \$26 this year for a 110 pound sack. The Somali shilling is valued at roughly 34,000 to the dollar—less than half what it was a year ago.

The United Nations food security unit warned recently that half of Somalia's 7 million people face famine, pointing to drought as well as food prices.

Last week, on May 1, the US fired missiles into a housing compound in the central Somali town of Dusa Marreb, killing Aden Hashi Ayro, a leader of the Shabaab Islamist militia that is fighting the US-backed government and Ethiopian occupation troops.

Washington claims that Ayro was one of Al Qaeda's top operatives in East Africa. ICU leaders deny any ties to Al Qaeda. Shabaab was added to the US government's terror list in March of this year.

At least four Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from a Navy ship or submarine off the Somali coast slammed into a compound of single-storey buildings in Dusa Marreb. US officials said Ayro was killed along with several top lieutenants, but witnesses said at least 30 people were killed, including civilians living in surrounding houses. The missile strike leveled an area about the size of two city blocks.

Islamist fighters said a second US air strike blasted a remote area of central Somalia hours after armed civilians met there. The US military denied the claim.

The missile strikes were carried out in advance of a UN-sponsored meeting set for May 10 in Djibouti, at which TFG officials and ICU leaders were to negotiate a possible truce.

In an interview on the "Democracy Now!" radio program, Professor Abdi Samatar, a professor of geography and global studies at the University of Minnesota and author of several books on Somali history, said of the missile strikes and food riots:

"It's as if there has been a calculated decision made somewhere in the world, maybe in Washington, maybe in Addis Ababa, maybe in Mogadishu itself, to starve these people until they submit themselves to the whims of the American military, in this instance, and the

Ethiopians, who are acting on their behalf."

The May 1 attack was the fifth US air strike in Somalia since the beginning of 2007. On March 3 of this year, the US Navy fired two Tomahawk missiles from a submarine off the coast of Somalia at Doble, a town in southern Somalia, killing at least three women and three children and wounding another twenty people.

The death and destruction inflicted on the Somali people at the hands of the United States and its proxy forces is an object lesson on the role of US imperialism in Africa and around the world. In December of 1992, the United States sent 30,000 troops, a naval armada, planes, tanks and attack helicopters to Somalia in the guise of a humanitarian mission to relieve a famine in the country.

"Operation Restore Hope," launched by the outgoing administration of the senior George Bush and continued by the new Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, was carried out to regain control of Somalia following the fall of the US-backed regime of longtime dictator Mohamed Siad Barre.

The US invasion was quickly directed to smashing the power of warlords considered to be obstacles to American domination of the country and the Horn of Africa as a whole. The US military was subsequently driven out of Somalia in 1993 in the well-known "Black Hawk down" incident, which claimed the lives of 19 American troops. It is now being employed in alliance with some of the same warlords that US forces were fighting 15 years ago.

On December 4, 1992, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, published a statement explaining the real nature and aims of the US intervention. This statement, which has been fully confirmed by subsequent events, declared: "... the American people are being overwhelmed by a hypocritical and cynical media barrage which depicts the invasion as a noble act of humanitarian aid to the starving Somali people..."

"In reality, the United States is preparing to carry out the military occupation of Somalia so it can install a puppet regime and establish American military and economic hegemony over the region.

"What is involved here is not simply an isolated military adventure, but the drive of American imperialism to recolonize Africa and large parts of Asia and Latin America."

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