

Somalia: Conflict rages in Mogadishu

By Brian Smith
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In the past few weeks, rebels from Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam have routed government forces in Mogadishu, seizing large areas of the city. The small areas that the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) controls are shrinking block by block. Rebels have also gained two key central Somalian towns from government forces, raising fears that the TFG may collapse again.

The TFG has responded with relentless mortar fire. "This is a large military offensive against violent people," Somali government military spokesman, Farhan Mahdi, said. "The government will sweep them out of the capital and the fighting will continue until that happens."

The upswing in violence, the heaviest fighting for months, has killed around 200 people and has caused a mass exodus. The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR estimates that more than 50,000 people have fled Mogadishu in the past few weeks, most of whom are heading to the Afgooye road southeast of the city, to join some 400,000 displaced people already there, where they face the worst drought in a decade.

President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was elected in February by the TFG after the United Nations brought together in Djibouti his wing of the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) and the rump of the previous TFG. Sharif was previously chairman of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which briefly ruled Somalia in 2006 before the United States-backed Ethiopian invasion forced the UIC into exile in Eritrea.

Sharif is now considered a "moderate" by the West. After his election, he returned to Mogadishu, attempting to negotiate with the more radical Islamists such as Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam. This strategy was thwarted by his US backers, who continue to denounce Sharif's former co-thinkers as Al Qaeda affiliates and prefer to rely on strong-arm tactics in their dealings with them.

Al Shabaab was initially the youth militia of the UIC but turned to guerrilla war when the UIC was ousted in December 2006. Hizbul Islam (Party of Islam) came together this January as a four-party umbrella group of oppositional Islamists, including a number of ex-Al

Shabaab units. It was initially led by Omar Imam Abubaker, though Sheikh Hassan Dahir "Aweys" took the lead last month. Aweys and Abubaker were chair and deputy chair in the UIC parliament in 2006. Aweys also led the Asmara faction of the ARS based in Eritrea following the UIC's ouster.

After Ethiopia's withdrawal in January, 4,300 Ugandan and Burundian peacekeepers from the African Union (AU) Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) took over the vacated positions in Mogadishu, but this gives control of only the presidential palace, the airport and the seaport. The rebels control much of the rest of the capital, along with most of central and southern Somalia. AMISOM troops did not take part in the latest round of clashes, but were forced to relocate to positions in the south of the city.

It seems likely that Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam have obtained arms via Eritrea, and accusations have been made that some of these arms originate in other Islamic countries such as Iran. Eritrea denies it supplies arms, stating that it is being framed by Ethiopia and the US. The US is keen to portray Eritrea as the aggressor in this situation and has exerted pressure on the AU and within the UN to impose sanctions.

The head of the AU's Peace and Security Council, Jean Ping, also appealed for a blockade of ports controlled by the insurgents, and repeated the AU's request for UN peacekeepers to replace the undermanned AMISOM troops. The UN Security Council has said it favours an eventual transition to a UN peacekeeping mission, but the security situation remains too precarious.

There are reports that Ethiopian troops have re-entered Somalia just five months after being forced to leave. Ethiopia's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Wahade Belay, denied the reports of an incursion. Somalia's information minister, Farhan Ali Mohamud, also played down the reports as inaccurate.

However, the *New York Times* reports that more than a dozen Ethiopian military trucks crossed the border into Somalia on May 19. It cites the governor of Somalia's

Hiran region, Sheik Abdirahman Ibrahim Macow, saying that the Ethiopian military set up a checkpoint at Kalabeyrka, which lies at a major road junction 22 kilometres from the Ethiopian border.

There are persistent reports from other news agencies including the BBC, Associated Press, Reuters and ABC South Africa, which cite local residents claiming to have seen a convoy of trucks with Ethiopian number plates, an Ethiopian checkpoint, troops speaking Ethiopia's Amharic language, and Ethiopian troops digging trenches.

Ethiopian troops were forced into a humiliating retreat and began leaving Somalia last December, complaining that the United States had not given them enough political and financial support in suppressing a growing Islamist rebellion.

The Ethiopian invasion in December 2006, intended to prop up the stooge TFG government was infamous for its brutality. An Amnesty International report in May 2008 accused the Ethiopian troops in Somalia of increasingly gruesome methods that include rape, torture and throat-slitting executions. Human Rights Watch issued an open letter to the African Union in March this year. "US policy on Somalia has been particularly unhelpful, treating Somalia's complex realities as a theatre in the 'war on terror' while turning a blind eye to rampant abuses by the Ethiopian and transitional government forces," it stated.

An estimated 1.2 million Somalis fled their homes, and 18,000 civilians were killed in the ensuing Iraq-style insurgency that plunged the country into chaos, where warlords and pirates flourished. More than 3 million Somalis currently survive on emergency food aid.

When Ethiopia withdrew, its government stated that it reserved the right to intervene in Somalia if its interests were directly threatened. The current reported intervention comes just three days after Islamist rebels took the town of Jowhar, cutting off the TFG government's access to territory north of Mogadishu. It would appear that Ethiopia's aim is to bolster Somalia's transitional president, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, and to prevent Islamist control of the country.

Richard Cornwell, African Security Analyst from the Institute for Security Studies in Tshwane in South Africa believes that Ethiopia's "intervention has to be different this time. It can't afford to be bogged down in an urban killing zone. It has to be more surgical and selective in its targets."

He added, "I would imagine they don't want to put

large numbers of troops into Somalia. They just need to locate Shabab's headquarters and zap it. I'm sure the Americans will be happy to help them do that, and we know the Americans have the munitions to do that."

The precarious situation facing President Sharif and the TFG appears to have prompted the US and Ethiopia to consider re-entry into Somalia. However, an Ethiopian border incursion could further destabilise not only Somalia but the entire region. It would also hand the Islamist rebels a propaganda coup.

Analyst Richard Cornwell explained, "The bigger the Al Shabab threat gets, the more the international community is likely to support Sharif. But the more international support Sharif gets, the more he is discredited in the eyes of the Somali people, and the more people will give their support to Shabab."

Analysts fear that a new axis of conflict has opened up in Somalia, in which people from different clans are forming alliances and fighting along religious lines, much as happened in Iraq following the US invasion. The former clan battles, which have previously been encouraged by the US, were often no more than a veneer for power struggles between businessmen and warlords.

"We're on terra incognita," said Rashid Abdi, an analyst at the International Crisis Group. "Before, everything was clan. Now we are beginning to see the contours of an ideological, sectarian war in Somalia for the first time, and that scares me."

A Sufi Islamist movement, Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a, has emerged in opposition to al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam, and now controls part of central Somalia. Al Shabaab towards the end of last year shot dead several Sufi students and attacked Sufi shrines. The Sufis are a loosely organised religious brotherhood allied to Sharif and the TFG. Like Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islam, Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a has promised to rule Somalia with some form of sha'aria law. Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a was allegedly provided with weapons and ammunition by departing Ethiopian troops in January.

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