

Somalia: Obama administration sends arms to prop up Islamist government

By Brian Smith
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The Obama administration has been sending weapons to Somalia since early May to support the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) against a rebel insurgency that threatens to overwhelm the government.

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly confirmed the shipments in late June, following an urgent plea by the TFG for international aid, including troops, as heavy fighting engulfed the capital Mogadishu.

Somali Parliamentary Speaker Sheikh Aden Mohamed Nur announced June 22, “The government is weakened by the rebel forces. We ask neighbouring countries—including Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Yemen—to send troops to Somalia within 24 hours.”

African Union (AU) President Jean Ping backed calls for armed intervention, saying that the Somali government “has the right to seek support from AU member states and the larger international community.”

Kelly offered no details of the military aid sent by Washington, claiming that it is in accordance with relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at curbing arms traffic to Somali combatants. However, Reuters cited an anonymous senior State Department official saying that Washington had spent around \$10 million providing approximately 40 tonnes of small arms and ammunition to the Somali government, and making payments to other nations to train Somali government forces.

The official told reporters that the US began providing arms soon after Somali insurgents started a major offensive against the TFG in early May.

The US also asked the AU’s Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping force in the country to give their weapons to the government, which it would then reimburse, the official said, adding that Washington set aside money to pay the AMISOM units to train

government forces rather than have US troops conduct the training.

Washington is aware of the inflammatory effect its own troops would have in the country following the Black Hawk Down incident of 1993 when it was chased out of Somalia. It has also sought to limit the role played by its proxy Ethiopia for fear that its re-entry would increase support for the insurgency. At US bidding Ethiopian troops were forced to withdraw in January, following the failure of its invasion of Somalia in 2006 aimed at propping up a previous incarnation of the TFG.

“Given the long-standing enmity between Somalis and Ethiopians I will encourage the Ethiopians not to re-engage in Somalia,” Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson told Reuters in early July. “It is not in their interest to do so and their efforts might in fact prove counterproductive to the government.”

Despite this official stance, there have been several sightings of Ethiopian soldiers in Somalia during the past two months. These reports were initially denied by Addis Ababa, but later acknowledged as “reconnaissance” missions. Ethiopia has said that it would need an international mandate before it would send troops back into Somalia to fight Islamist rebels. But if there was “a clear and present danger then we will deal with a clear and present danger in any way we can,” Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi announced.

“Ethiopia has a right to defend its borders, should do so vigorously if individuals cross into their territory, and their efforts should be directed at defence of their territory and not necessarily involvement inside of Somalia,” Carson said.

His comments are some of the first statements by the

Obama administration on the Horn of Africa in general and on Somalia in particular. Washington remained silent on the January election of President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, an Islamist and former colleague of the rebels who was previously hunted by Washington, though the US embassy in neighbouring Kenya welcomed him as a “moderate” who had signed the US-backed peace agreement in Djibouti.

The US administration now acts as though Sharif is a long-time ally, with Carson telling reporters that the US would send more arms. “The United States will continue to look for ways to provide support,” he said. “This will include military support in terms of arms and munitions and material resources, but not manpower.”

Osama bin Laden declared Sharif an enemy of Islam in an audiotape released in March, and called on insurgents to topple the TFG. Two allied Islamist insurgent groups, al-Shabaab and the Hizbul Islam, began an offensive after Sharif’s return to Mogadishu from Djibouti in April. The ensuing offensive and government retaliation has displaced more than 100,000 people and forced thousands to flee Mogadishu. Many have joined the estimated 400,000 people who were already living rough along the Afgooye corridor, about 20 kilometres south of the capital.

A few days after Washington disclosed that it had supplied arms to Somalia, it sent a further shipment. TFG officials revealed that at least two military planes landed at Mogadishu airport, which was closed to commercial flights.

In a breathtaking revision of history, which denies the US role in plunging the country into interminable chaos, Kelly sought to justify the recent arms shipments in humanitarian terms. He said, “This kind of violence is causing real suffering for the Somali people, and it’s just prolonging the chaos and preventing the country from getting on stable footings.”

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon endorsed the US arms shipments in a quarterly report to the Security Council recently calling on all countries to provide urgent military support to the TFG.

“The coming days and weeks will be critical,” said Ban. “The government clearly needs urgent military support in areas of personnel, arms and logistics to

sustain its success in warding off insurgent attacks and defending key installations,” he said. “I, therefore, appeal to the entire international community to render urgent support to the government of Somalia, without which it may not be able to establish itself.”

Ban urged donors who pledged over \$213 million in April to support AMISOM and Somalia’s security institutions to honour their commitments. AMISOM has 4,300 troops from Uganda and Burundi and is struggling to defend government buildings, the port and airport in Mogadishu. The government holds only a few blocks in the city, but appeals for more troops and a stronger mandate allowing them to go on the offensive have not met any response.

Carson said that the US was undecided on whether the AMISOM mandate should be enhanced. “We will study it closely in Washington and make a determination as to whether it is in our interests to encourage an expanded mandate as this goes forward,” he said.

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