

Somalia: Troop surge in support of US-backed puppet government

By Brian Smith
25 February 2010

The Washington-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia is reported to be preparing a major offensive against Islamist rebels who control the bulk of the country. The plan, which has been months in preparation, is believed to comprise a three-pronged strategy involving Kenyan-trained Somalis from the south, an Ethiopian-backed militia from the northwest, and TFG forces, with US-trained African Union peacekeepers (AMISOM) attempting to consolidate control over the capital Mogadishu.

The *Wall Street Journal* has drawn parallels between the attempt to prop up a puppet regime by carving out “a secure area of Mogadishu” with what is happening in Afghanistan and Iraq. “The strategy takes a page from US counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, where strengthening a weak government has been seen as pivotal in the US-led wars against Islamic militants,” the *Journal* observes.

Somalia’s neighbours Ethiopia and Kenya are key client states of Washington in the region, and it is inconceivable that the Obama administration is not party to the planned offensive. The web site Stratfor, which has close links to the US government, has discussed the plans in what the American ruling elite considers a geopolitically strategic part of the world.

The TFG has massed its forces in Mogadishu and is setting up police checkpoints around the parts of the capital that it still controls. Militants from the insurgent group al Shabaab, backed by a faction of Hizbul Islam, have also poured into the capital and its outskirts to reinforce the numerous and organised groups already there. A serious showdown appears imminent, and the first skirmishes and forays have already begun.

The upturn in conflict began in January when thousands of newly trained Somali troops returned from camps in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Burundi, Kenya and Uganda and were pitched into battle in al Shabaab-controlled areas in Mogadishu, in southern Somalia up to the border with Kenya, and in central Somalia along the Ethiopian border in

an area that is partly controlled by the Ethiopian-backed Islamist militia Ahlu Sunnah Waljamaah.

Ahlu Sunnah Waljamaah arose in late 2008 as the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia led Addis Ababa to seek a means of containing the Islamist threat on its border. The TFG has been courting Ahlu Sunnah for some time, and President Sharif Ahmed asked them to join his government last November, leading to the two sides signing a pact in December stating Ahlu Sunnah’s intention to do so.

Hizbul Islam emerged in February 2009 as a rival of al Shabaab, and was composed of four separate militias: a faction of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), led by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweysa, who briefly ruled Somalia in 2006 as head of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC); the Ras Kamboni Brigades, led by Sheikh Hassan al-Turki; Anole, led by Sheikh Ahmed Madobe; and the Somali Islamic Front.

Al Shabaab won control of the southern port of Kismayo from Hizbul Islam last October, gaining a key source of revenue as well as a potential entry point for weapons supplies. The loss ultimately led to the splintering of Hizbul Islam. One faction led by al-Turki recently joined forces with al Shabaab, whilst the other faction led by Madobe continues to oppose it and has returned to southern Somalia. Last week, after fierce fighting, Madobe’s faction drove al Shabaab out of Dhobley, a strategic town close to the Kenyan border, and claims to be pushing towards Kismayo. While there is no evidence that Anole is in league with the TFG or Ahlu Sunnah, Madobe’s actions mesh with the imminent offensive.

The influx of opposing forces has led to a mass exodus of civilians from Mogadishu, as thousands of residents have fled to cramped makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city. Civilians who remain bear the brunt of the early conflict. AMISOM troops fired shells into areas of the city that are controlled by the militants, and at least 10 civilians were reportedly killed.

Over 250 people have been killed across the country in the

past month, and 100,000 others have been displaced, 18,000 of whom have been displaced from Mogadishu. This makes January the deadliest month since last August, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees. Amnesty International estimates that some 1.5 million people have been displaced by fighting in Somalia since 2007 and that around 3.7 million are dependent on humanitarian assistance. In addition, some 560,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighbouring countries, including Kenya, Yemen and Ethiopia.

US imperialism is primarily responsible for the chaos and insecurity in Somalia, following decades of support for warlords and illegitimate governments. President Sharif is a former adversary of Washington. His UIC government was overthrown by the US/Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in late 2006. The stooge government that was established was widely despised by the population. Sharif's decision to lead his faction of the ARS into the government was welcomed by the US. It led directly to the factional infighting that now besets Somalia.

The rise of piracy in the Gulf of Aden off the Somali coast followed the overthrow of the UIC as lawlessness returned to the country, and has been used by the US and other powers as a pretext to flood the oil-rich area with warships. Somalia, and Yemen on the other side of the narrow waterway, are seen by the US as key spots in its efforts to control this strategic area as it confronts its rivals, primarily China, and builds for war with Iran.

Despite the growing humanitarian crisis in Somalia, the US and British governments, which are the largest donors of food assistance, gave less than half of their planned contributions last year, according to Kiki Gbeho, head of the UN's office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs. Washington is now withholding millions of dollars in aid. Both governments claim that their actions are a response to supplies being diverted to al Shabaab and other militant groups. Peter Smerdon, the World Food Programme's spokesman in Nairobi, disagrees. "WFP has concluded an internal investigation and we found no evidence that our staff divert food and there was no evidence that our transporters did the same," he said.

Mark Bowden, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Somalia, concurs. "No UN agency has paid any money to al Shabaab," he declared, adding, "Our concern is that what we're seeing is a politicisation of humanitarian issues."

Bowden also believes that ordinary civilians are suffering because Washington is imposing impossible conditions on aid agencies in Somalia. "The measures they [the US government] have asked the NGOs and the UN agencies to take—some have been OK and others are seen to be essentially impractical and impossible for us to report on

and meet," he said.

Amnesty International recently issued a report, "Somalia: International Military and Policing Should be Reviewed," setting out its concerns regarding arms supplies to the TFG, including those supplied by Washington, which are transferred "without adequate safeguards to ensure that they will not be used in committing human rights abuses."

Amnesty notes that since Sharif's appointment as president in January 2009, "pledged and actual international support for Somalia's army, police forces and other security sector institutions has grown" as his puppet regime struggles to hold onto the small area of Mogadishu it still controls. However, it notes "donors' concern for the viability of the TFG and the security of international shipping has not been matched by equal attention to the human rights of the Somali people and the protection of civilians."

Washington recently sent 40 tons of arms to Somalia, including rocket propelled grenades and mortar ammunition, which Amnesty refers to as "indirect-fire munitions," and which it notes have been used by all sides in the conflict, including the TFG, in the "indiscriminate or disproportionate bombardment from or of densely populated civilian areas in Mogadishu."

Amnesty is particularly concerned about the US government's intention to supply the TFG with around \$2 million in cash with which to buy further arms and which will "help to support Mogadishu's flourishing, uncontrolled domestic arms markets." Amnesty also condemned the training and arming of Somali government troops, including that given by the US and European Union, and local US allies such as Kenya.

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