

Britain considers air strikes against Somali insurgents

By Jean Shaoul
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Britain's National Security Council is considering sending the helicopter carrier HMS Ocean to Somalia to conduct air strikes and commando raids against al-Shabaab and other Islamic militant groups fighting the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

According to the *Guardian*, helicopter gunships would target the training camps and logistics hubs of al-Shabaab, particularly in southern Somalia, as well as pirate strongholds. The United States, Britain, France, Denmark and the Netherlands drew up contingency plans during the summer of 2010, and again last year, for what was termed "over the beach" air strikes against Somali camps.

The US has for years been sending unmanned drones from neighbouring Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya to hit targets inside Somalia. It has a new CIA base in the Somali capital Mogadishu and operates a fleet of vessels off the Somali coast.

The *Sun* reported that Attorney General Dominic Grieve had been consulted and ruled that such raids would be legal under international law. But the newspaper said its source claimed that Prime Minister David Cameron was "talked down" from launching any attacks "for the time being."

Cameron said that any British involvement in Somalia would be limited for the time being to backing the African Union force (AMISOM), largely made up of troops from Uganda and Burundi and also backed by the UN, the US, Japan, Sweden, the European Union, the Arab League and NATO.

The UN has just agreed to increase its support for AMISOM, boosting its troops from 10,000 to 17,000 and transferring 4,731 Kenyan troops to the mission. Last October, Kenyan troops invaded Somalia with Washington's backing to attack al-Shabaab

strongholds. The UN contributes about \$550 million, while the EU and US each contribute about \$150 million to AMISOM.

The British government claims that the rebels' camps are being used to radicalise and train young Britons of Somali origin, a claim previously used to legitimise war on Afghanistan.

Somalia's bitterly divided TFG has little political or military control over the country or even Mogadishu. Initially installed in 2004 for a period of five years while new constitutional arrangements were worked out, such was the opposition to the TFG's rule that the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), made up of 13 disparate Islamic groups, took power in 2006. The ICU, to which Washington was vehemently opposed, was driven out by Ethiopian troops, with US backing, six months later.

Since 2009, the TFG has had three prime ministers. Current Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali welcomed "targeted strikes" against oppositionists.

The leaks about Britain's plans for air strikes came days before Cameron hosted an international summit on Somalia at Lancaster House in London. Its ostensible purpose was to discuss the new constitutional arrangements to replace the TFG, whose mandate ends in August, and to aid the country.

Some 2.34 million of Somalia's 7 million people—mainly in the southern part of the country controlled by al-Shabaab—are dependent on food aid following last year's famine, which killed 80,000 people. More than 2 million have been displaced or sought refuge in neighbouring countries as a result of more than 20 years of wars and famine.

The conference was attended by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, delegations from some of Somalia's fiefdoms, and representatives from 40 other countries.

It was an ill-disguised attempt to gain support for military intervention and further the strategic interests of the imperialist and regional powers. The aim is to negate the sovereignty of the Somali people and lay the basis for the dismemberment of the country, based on support for “sub-national entities” backed by neighbouring countries.

A new constitution is to be agreed on and elections held before August. The conference proposed, along the lines of a paper by London’s Royal Institute of International Affairs, to accept that Somalia is made up of various fiefdoms—each with different regional backing—and, in effect, cantonise the country.

Somaliland in the Gulf of Aden, not internationally recognised as an independent state, broke away from Somalia in 1991 and will receive £105 million aid over three years. The coastal region of Puntland, south of Somaliland, operates as an autonomous state.

The Ethiopians are backing their proxies, the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ), which controls a block of land adjacent to Ethiopia. Galmudug is another clan-based fiefdom bordering on Puntland and Ethiopia, while in the south, Jubaland, sometimes known as Azania, is backed by Kenya.

Al-Shabaab still controls much of southern Somalia, once the country’s breadbasket, while the pirates control the coastal strip between Eyl in the north and Haradheere in the centre.

Rather than intervene directly and openly, the imperialist powers are seeking to maintain their control over this vital region via local proxies. Such plans carry the risk of clashes over borders and spheres of influence between the rival warlords and venal business cliques that depend on overseas sponsors, sparking a wider conflagration that could draw in their regional backers, who are themselves hardly more stable than Somalia.

The Western powers are looking for more support from the Arab League, particularly the Gulf States. Turkey is playing an increasing role in the region, sending aid during last year’s famine and recently opening an embassy in Mogadishu. It is to host a further conference in Istanbul in June.

Britain’s interest in the war-torn and poverty-stricken country reflects its position as the former colonial power in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and breakaway Somaliland, and its desire to maintain its position as

America’s most loyal partner to secure its share of the region’s natural resources. Drilling by Africa Oil has begun in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, the first oil exploration in 21 years.

Somalia occupies a strategic position in the Horn Africa. It has a 1,000-mile coastline opposite Yemen on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, through which 23,000 ships transit every year carrying nearly \$1 trillion worth of trade to and from Europe. Somalia’s long coastline has been one of the reasons behind landlocked Ethiopia’s constant interference in Somali affairs.

The TFG has signed a treaty with Kenya changing the territorial waters of the two countries in Kenya’s favour.

Last week, newly independent South Sudan signed an agreement with Kenya to build an oil pipeline costing \$4 billion linking to the Kenya port of Lamu, not far from the border with Somalia. This is to be South Sudan’s main oil export outlet. The new port will be five times larger than Mombasa, Kenya’s Indian Ocean port that serves the landlocked countries in Kenya’s hinterland. Another pipeline would link it to an oil refinery in Kampala, Uganda, which has recently started producing oil.

A further pipeline will link the Kenyan capital Nairobi with Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa, providing Ethiopia with another export route if the oil exploration, currently underway in the Ogaden region which borders Somalia, is successful.

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