

Behind the Obama Visit to East Africa. Imperialism with a “Human Face”, Outright Militarization of the African Continent

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Washington's foreign policy towards Africa was highlighted recently through the visit of President Barack Obama to Kenya and Ethiopia.

Also the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, came to the United States the previous week and held high-level meetings with Obama along with other officials in the State Department and the Pentagon.

Obama's term ends next year and many have criticized him for not visiting the country where his father was born since he was elected to office in 2008. Kenya has been a longtime ally of the U.S. since the early days of independence in 1963 under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of the East African state.

The president attended a business development conference in Kenya. He emphasized during his trip the much-touted phenomenal economic growth on the continent.

Although there has been the enhanced exploitation of natural gas and other strategic resources in East Africa, economic problems persist. Kenya is a capitalist country that is heavily dependent upon the marketing of agricultural, clothing and tourism to the West.

Unemployment and poverty continues to trap millions while economic relations with the imperialist states do not offer any significant prospects for the absorption of large segments of the population into the urbanized labor market. Most people still work in the agricultural sectors of the economy through the production of tea, coffee, sisal and other products.

During the 1990s, Kenya was unable to pay its loans to the international financial institutions and instituted reforms which made the country more attractive to multi-national corporations and banks for investment. With the institution of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in the U.S. under the administration of President Bill Clinton, the country began to produce clothing for export to the western states.

The mineral exploitation taking place inside the country is limited at present.

Nonetheless, there has been exploration for offshore oil resources on the border between Kenya and Somalia. These new areas of potential investments by the multi-national petroleum firms may be clearly related to the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) intervention in Somalia which was carried out in late 2011 at the aegis of Washington through the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

The Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Nairobi was opened by Obama who pledged over a billion dollars in investments from the U.S. government along with U.S.-based banks, foundations and donors. 50 percent of the investments will go to women and young people, who face obstacles when trying to start businesses, says Obama.

“If half of your team is not playing, you’ve got a problem,” Obama told the conference, ostensibly referring to women who face gender oppression in Kenya.

Yet the major thrust of U.S. policy in Kenya, Somalia and other East African states has been militaristic along with extracting minerals, exploiting labor and exporting commodities from the these countries. The current crisis in Somalia is a direct result of failed U.S. policy during both the former Bush administration and the present government.

In an article published last year in Somalia Current it says that “what is currently taking place across the Somalia-Kenya offshore border where Kenya recently awarded six oil and gas blocks to the international oil companies (IOC), within Somali offshore territory approximately 120,000 km². Italy, Norway, the USA and France are tended to be exploiting the trans-boundary area. It was apparent that those greedy alliances’ aim is to plunder Somalia’s offshore hydrocarbon resources and this has become more obvious since Kenya started invading southern Somalia in October 2011 while its allies such as France, Italy and Norway kept quiet about the invasion.” (Sept. 23, 2014)

Failed Imperialist Counter-terrorism Strategy

The counter-terrorism strategy of Washington through AFRICOM has still not stabilized the political situation in Somalia or Kenya. On July 26, the same day that Obama arrived in the neighboring Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, a car bomb exploded outside the Jazeera Hotel in Mogadishu, Somalia killing 13 people, at least one of whom was a Chinese national.

In December of 2006, under the previous administration of President George W. Bush, the U.S. encouraged the Ethiopian government to invade Somalia in order to overturn the growing influence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). After a two-and-a-half year occupation, the Al-Shabaab guerrilla movement emerged from the ICU and continued a war of insurgency against the U.S. and European Union (EU) supported regime in Mogadishu.

At present some 22,000 troops from the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) are still occupying the Horn of Africa state. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon regularly conducts drone strikes in Somalia where they have bases of operation.

Ethiopian Post-Revolution Role

The 1974 Ethiopian Revolution and its socialist orientation were overthrown in 1991 just several months prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under Gorbachev, support for national liberation movements and national democratic revolutionary governments in Africa was withdrawn creating a crisis throughout the international community.

The post-revolution government in Addis Ababa has been closely aligned with the U.S. and other western states. Ethiopian troops although withdrawn in early 2009 after defeats in Somalia, have re-entered the country.

The presence of both the KDF and Ethiopian troops are a cause for concern even within the

Somalia Federal Government that is recognized by Washington and Wall Street.

Obama also addressed the security and political crisis in the newly-independent Republic of South Sudan. This state is a result of a western-supported secessionist movement which resulted in the partition of the Republic of Sudan based in Khartoum, which previously was the largest geographic nation-state in Africa.

South Sudan leaders have been split since December 2013 over the future course of the country. President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Reik Machar have led separate factions within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLA/M) resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the deaths of several thousand in a civil war in the continent's and the world's most recent United Nations and African Union recognized state.

In a joint statement issued by Obama with Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, it says that "We have agreed to intensify the campaign against terrorism in the region, and we both noted with satisfaction the progress AMISOM forces and Somali National Army are making, with the support of the U.S. and other partners, in their fight against al-Shabaab."

This same statement continues stressing "We have agreed to deepen our intelligence cooperation both bilaterally as well as regionally. We have both noted and underscored that this cooperation is essential to curb the menace posed by terrorism. The terrorist attack that was launched in Mogadishu yesterday is a stark reminder that we need to work even more in this respect." (White House Press Release, July 27)

Obama was scheduled to address the AU Commission based in Addis Ababa on July 28.

Nonetheless, there were no plans to meet with President Robert Mugabe of the Republic of Zimbabwe who is the sitting chair of the continental body. Instead he will likely meet with Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the AU Commission Chairperson, who is originally from the Republic of South Africa.

Such a situation of not meeting with a head-of-state that leads the continental body is reflective of the character of U.S. imperialism even under Obama. Zimbabwe is not a favored state by Washington particularly since the land reform program of 2000 which redistributed white-owned farms to Africans who were expropriated during the colonial wars of the late 19th century.

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