

Is Washington Using Famine in the Horn of Africa to Embark on Yet Another Illegal War?

US Drones Coordinate Air Power For Kenyan Ground Invasion of Somalia

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The large troop deployment by Kenya into Somali territory is taking on the form of a full-scale invasion, rather than a temporary incursion as initially reported.

What is also emerging - but largely unreported - is that the US appears to be providing coordinated aerial firepower to help the advance of the Kenyan military against Al Shabab Islamic militants who have held power in the southern Somali territory.

Somalia's Transitional Federal Government, which was installed in 2009 with US support, has been battling against the militants for the past two years. Plagued by allegations of corruption and incompetence, the TFG has only managed to cling on to power in the capital, Mogadishu, thanks to diplomatic and military support from Washington and neighbouring US-allied countries, including Ethiopia and Kenya. Some 8,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi are stationed in Mogadishu to help stave off advances by Al Shabab from the southern hinterland where it holds sway.

Kenya's surprise military intervention in its eastern Horn of Africa neighbour on Sunday came only two days after the US launched deadly aerial drone attacks in southern Somalia. According to Press TV, the worst fatalities were in the town of Qoqani, 80 kilometres from the border with Kenya. Some 78 people were killed in that attack and scores of others injured.

Qoqani was the first major urban centre commandeered by Kenyan troops - backed by heavy artillery, tanks, helicopters and fighter jets - within 48 hours of crossing the border on Sunday.

Now as Kenyan forces move towards the port city of Kismayu - some 200 kilometers from the Kenyan border and the strategic base for Al Shabab - US drones are targeting what appears to be the next military objective.

A US drone attack on Kismayu on Monday claimed the lives of some 27 people, including children, according to reports. There were also several reports of similar unmanned aerial vehicles crashing or being shot down near Kismayu, according to the BBC and Press TV. At the beginning of last month, a US drone attack reportedly killed 35 Al Shabab fighters in the port city.

In July, the Washington Post and New York Times, reported "the first US drone attack" on Somalia in which two Al Shabab commanders were targeted. The Obama administration has

labeled Al Shabab a terrorist group and accuses the Islamists of having links to Al Qaeda. In recent weeks, there appears to be have been a stepped-up deployment of both spy and attack drones in Al Shabab strongholds.

In light of Kenya's invasion of Somalia this week, it would now appear that US air power has played a key role in softening up combatant positions in advance of ground troops.

The Kenyan government – as with most media reports – claim that the intervention is aimed at hunting down kidnap gangs operated by Al Shabab which have been responsible for a spate of cross-border attacks on tourists and aid workers. A British and French woman were recently kidnapped in separate incidents in Kenyan coastal resorts. Reports are emerging that the French woman has since died while in captivity from lack of medical treatment. Then two Spanish aid workers were abducted from a refugee camp in Kenyan territory near the Somali border. Al Shabab sources have denied any involvement in attacks on foreign nationals, and the Islamist group says that the Kenyans are using the kidnap allegations as a pretext to invade a sovereign country. There are several disparate criminal groups operating in southern Somalia – pirates and bandits – that could have carried out the kidnappings.

However, the lack of proof implicating Al Shabab has not deterred the Kenyan government from stridently asserting blame.

That together with the large-scale military intervention by the Kenyan government, which has caused much concern among many of its own citizens over its legality, suggests that there is more going on than a cross-border swoop against criminal gangs. Also, the tacit approval by the Mogadishu government for the Kenyan invasion and the coordinated use of US drone attacks indicate a more far-reaching development.

The geostrategic importance of Somalia has long made it a prize for Washington. With its nearly 1,800-kilometre coastline overlooking the oil trading routes of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, the US has been vying for a foothold on the territory ever since its independence from Britain and Italy in 1960. Washington backed the dictatorship of Siad Barre until he was ousted in 1991 by rival warlords. This prompted the US to mount its “humanitarian” invasion in 1992 – Operation Restore Hope – which ended in disaster in 1994 following the shooting down of a Blackhawk helicopter and the death of 19 US personnel whose bodies were dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in front of the world's media by Somali militants.

Since then Washington has preferred to use proxy forces to project its interests in the notoriously unruly country. In 2006, President George Bush gave the greenlight for the invasion by Ethiopia to topple a nascent Islamic government – the Union of Islamic Courts – that had managed to bring a degree of stability to the country out of the warlord anarchy. The Transitional Federal Government was installed three years later, but it has never consolidated control of the country, with the Islamists running most of the southern territory – much to Washington's dismay. Newly elected President Barack Obama has taken up the gauntlet with gusto. In September 2009, he ordered the assassination of senior Al Shabab commander Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan by helicopter-borne US Special Forces.

Somalia's famine may now have opened up an opportunity for Washington to pursue its proxy war. Two years of drought and conflict have left some four million Somalis exposed to hunger – with 750,000 most acutely at risk, according to various humanitarian agencies.

Most of the famine victims are located in Somalia's southern region controlled by Al Shabab. Washington has pointedly refused to let food aid into the region, citing that the provisions would be misappropriated by the militants.

With rising hunger and incidence of diseases such as cholera, measles and typhoid, the military strength of Al Shabab has considerably weakened in recent weeks, according to the International Crisis Group.

This suggests that Washington has used the famine - the worst such famine seen in the Horn of Africa for 60 years - as a weapon to bring about its desired military objective: the crushing of a combatant force that is inconveniencing US geopolitical control of a strategically important country.

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