

The Nightmare in Somalia

Another US Sponsored Catastrophe

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U.S.-BACKED Ethiopian troops withdrew from their remaining positions in Somalia at the end of January, bringing an end to a two-year occupation carried out in the guise of the “war on terror.”

The Ethiopian Army invaded Somalia in December 2006, overthrowing the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) government and installing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Two years later, approximately 10,000 people have lost their lives, and 1.1 million Somalis were turned into refugees, the victims of Ethiopian occupiers and an ongoing civil war.

From the beginning, the TFG, though backed by the U.S., was weak, maintaining control in only a small area of the capital of Mogadishu, and some regions of western Somalia. Several thousand African Union troops—including U.S.-trained Ugandan forces—ostensibly bolster the TFG, to little effect. The U.S. also intervened directly in Somalia with sporadic air strikes.

After the Ethiopian invasion, sections of the UIC and other opposition forces regrouped in the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), with others coalescing around the fundamentalist al-Shabab group and other armed factions.

Ethiopian troops withdrew after a unity agreement between the TFG and the ARS, now the major opposition faction. Sheik Sharif Ahmed, the ARS leader and head of the UIC government in 2006, was elected president of the TFG on January 31.

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SOMALIA IS located in the strategically crucial Horn of Africa on the eastern edge of the continent—adjacent to the Red Sea, Suez Canal and key commercial waterways. Somalia and neighboring Sudan have been targeted for oil exploration by U.S. companies, but China, India and other countries have also gotten their foot in the door with development contracts.

Competition past and present is behind the U.S. government’s concern with Somalia. The U.S. has variously engaged in direct intervention (as in the infamous “Black Hawk Down” Marine invasion of 1992-3), backed different warlord factions and supported proxy armies (such as Ethiopia).

Actually, the history of Western intervention in Somalia and the Horn of Africa extends back throughout the 20th century, during which time colonial powers and the Cold War superpowers waged proxy battles in constantly shifting alliances and conflicts. Somalia’s civil wars—like those in Darfur and southern Sudan—must be seen as a direct result of the U.S. and the former USSR arming different sides with billions of dollars, all while famines

raged.

The so-called humanitarian intervention by U.S. Marines in Somalia in 1992–93 was merely a continuation of this policy with a different name. Along with “fighting terror,” humanitarian intervention became a watchword for the Clinton administration and the Bush administration after it—providing a cover for Washington’s pursuit of economic and military aims, and justifying U.S. military deployment in the region.

In 2003, while the U.S. was invading and occupying Iraq, the U.S. military built a major base in Djibouti, a tiny but strategically located country next to Somalia and across the Red Sea from Yemen. The U.S. used its Camp Lemonier to train Ethiopian forces in the lead-up to the December 2006 invasion of Somalia.

As Mike Whitney pointed out on the Counterpunch Web site: “The Bush administration invoked the ‘war on terror’ to justify its involvement in Somalia, but its claims are unconvincing. The UIC is not an al-Qaeda affiliate or a terrorist organization. In fact, the UIC brought a level of peace and stability to Somalia that hadn’t been seen for nearly two decades.”

Political analyst James Petras made a similar point:

The UIC was a relatively honest administration, which ended warlord corruption and extortion. Personal safety and property were protected, ending arbitrary seizures and kidnappings by warlords and their armed thugs.

The UIC is a broad multi-tendency movement that includes moderates and radical Islamists, civilian politicians and armed fighters, liberals and populists, electoralists and authoritarians. Most important, the Courts succeeded in unifying the country and creating some semblance of nationhood, overcoming clan fragmentation.

But Bush didn’t let this relative stability under the UIC get in the way. According to a Chicago Tribune article, the invasion in Somalia was “a covert war in which the CIA has recruited gangs of unsavory warlords to hunt down and kidnap Islamic militants...and secretly imprison them offshore, aboard U.S. warships. The British civil-rights group Reprieve contended that as many as 17 U.S. warships may have doubled as floating prisons since the September 11 terrorist attacks.”

Only one month after the 9/11 attacks, Paul Wolfowitz, one of the top neo-con hawks in the Bush administration, met with various factions in Ethiopia and Somalia, alleging that al-Qaeda terrorists might use these territories as “escape routes.”

On December 4, 2006, Gen. John Abizaid, then the head of U.S. Central Command covering much of the Middle East and the surrounding region, met with the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Three weeks later, Ethiopian forces crossed into Somalia, and the U.S. launched air strikes to back them up. The air attacks were supposedly against terrorist targets, but they killed dozens of civilians. The U.S. also embedded small numbers of Special Forces in the Ethiopian army, and provided naval and air support.

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THE END result of the U.S. intervention has been untold destruction. Human Rights Watch published a report in December 2008 detailing the impact:

Two years of unconstrained warfare and violent rights abuses have helped to generate an ever-worsening humanitarian crisis, without adequate response. Since January 2007, at least 870,000 civilians have fled the chaos in Mogadishu alone—two-thirds of the city’s population...Somalia’s humanitarian needs are enormous.

Humanitarian organizations estimate that more than 3.25 million Somalis—over 40 percent of the population of south-central Somalia—will be in urgent need of assistance by the end of 2008...Freelance militias have robbed, murdered and raped displaced persons on the roads south towards Kenya. Hundreds of Somalis have drowned this year in desperate attempts to cross the Gulf of Aden by boat to Yemen.

Amnesty International documented numerous accounts of killings of Somalis by Ethiopian troops. In one case, “a young child’s throat was slit by Ethiopian soldiers in front of the child’s mother.”

And according to the Red Cross, about half of Somalia’s population is dependent on food aid. Millions live in tent cities without adequate water, food or power, while hyperinflation has driven up the price of staple goods by six times since the start of 2008. As Whitney puts it, “It is the greatest humanitarian crisis in Africa today; a man-made hell entirely conjured up in Washington.”

Somalis celebrated the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, and President Sheikh Ahmed enjoys popular support as a legacy of past UIC rule. The U.S. government’s short-term goal of installing a partner in counter-terror appears thwarted.

Yet Sheikh Ahmed’s openness to the U.S. and his collaboration with the TFG now divides his forces from other wings of the former UIC, including groups like al-Shabab, which is on the U.S. government’s list of terrorist organizations. For the U.S., the split is welcome.

Meanwhile, attacks by Somali armed groups have continued. Suicide bombers, likely connected to al-Shabab, attacked African Union troops on February 3.

The longer-term picture likewise indicates increased volatility in the region. Since the collapse of the UIC government in 2006, a resurgence of pirate attacks off the Somali coast—with some holding multimillion-dollar tankers hostage—recently prompted the Chinese and Indian governments to send naval patrols, an unprecedented move for China.

Faced with this heightened militarization, Bush called for sending warships to the Gulf of Aden as well, and Barack Obama has pledged support for continuing that policy.

The Obama administration is also a strong proponent of Africom, a new U.S. military command for Africa officially launched on October 1, 2008, with the frightening potential to subject Somalia and other countries and regions to U.S. terror on a new scale. In fact, Africom could mean the Somali experience writ large for the entire continent, with local proxies and enhanced military reinforcement.

As Nunu Kidane put it in an article titled “Africom, Militarization and Resource Control”:

If you're thinking traditional bases with thousands of military personnel, think again. General Kip Ward has said it is not about "bases" and "garrisons," but rather a network of sophisticated military operations strategically placed throughout the continent, which can be moved around and utilized for any purpose.

General Gates called Africom "a different kind of command with a different orientation, one that we hope and expect will institutionalize a lasting security relationship with Africa." It is "a civilian-military partnership," where diplomatic and humanitarian relief by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will get directives from the Department of Defense.

Africa Action and other human rights groups have rightly called on the Obama administration to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Somalia. But one often-proposed solution—United Nations peacekeepers—would only escalate the problems for ordinary Somalis. On the ground, UN troops would carry out U.S. priorities, just as they did during the "humanitarian intervention" of 1993.

Instead, activists should stand against any U.S. military intervention in Somalia, from Africom to the naval patrols. Challenging the "war on terror" is a crucial first step toward real peace for Somalis.

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