

U.S.-Trained Somali Troops Defect to Insurgency

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MOGADISHU, Somalia — Hundreds of Somali troops trained with millions of U.S. tax dollars have deserted because they are not being paid their \$100 monthly wage, and some have even joined the al-Qaida-linked militants they are supposed to be fighting, The Associated Press has learned.

The desertions raise fears that a new U.S.-backed effort beginning next month to build up Somalia's army may only increase the ranks of the insurgency.

Somalia's besieged U.N.-backed government holds only a few blocks of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, while Islamic insurgents control the rest of the city and most of the country. That turmoil — and the lawless East African nation's proximity to Yemen, where al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula is based — has fed fears that Somalia could be used to launch attacks on the West.

In an effort to rebuild the tattered Somali military, the United States spent \$6.8 million supporting training programs for nearly 1,000 soldiers in neighboring Djibouti last year, and about 1,100 soldiers in Uganda last year and earlier this year, the State Department and Western diplomats told AP. The troops were supposed to earn \$100 a month, but about half of those trained in Djibouti deserted because they were not paid, Somali army Col. Ahmed Aden Dhayow said.

"Some gave up the army and returned to their ordinary life, and others joined the rebels," he said.

Somalia's state minister for defense, Yusuf Mohamed Siyad, confirmed some trainees had joined the al-Shabab militants, but he declined to specify the number of deserters.

The development highlights a key problem facing efforts to rebuild the bankrupt nation's army — guaranteeing funding for soldiers' salaries, not just their training.

Failure to resolve the pay issue could threaten the success of a U.S. and European Union training program beginning in Uganda next month that has been touted as the biggest effort to rebuild the army in 20 years.

Funding for the Somali army is a complex affair involving contributions from donor nations, the U.N. and the Somali government. Individual countries sometimes pledge to cover salaries for a limited number of soldiers for a few months, and when the money runs out, salaries don't get paid.

The U.S. has provided \$2 million to pay Somali soldiers and purchase supplies and equipment in Mogadishu since 2007, according to the State Department. Another \$12

million went toward transport, uniforms and equipment.

During a recent AP visit, dejected-looking soldiers sat under dust-covered thorn trees at the government's main military base, Camp Jazira, which lacks toilets, a clinic or even a perimeter fence. They had not been paid, some for months, they said, adding that their wages were intercepted by senior officials.

When pressed for details, mid-level officers glanced at colleagues clutching plastic bags of spaghetti, the day's lunch ration, before saying they could not discuss the problem.

"There is not enough money to pay everyone," Col. Ali Hassan said as a group of officers listened, then added hastily: "But we are happy there is some money."

Earlier this year, trainee soldiers had their guns confiscated and replaced with sticks after a riot broke out between those who had been paid and those who had not. The African Union, which has peacekeepers at Camp Jazira, temporarily suspended payments over fears that men who had been paid would be killed by those who had not, an official involved with the training said.

Soldiers also had problems with some battalion-level commanders stealing their rations, a European official said. The U.S. has sent a shipment of food this month to try to help the malnourished soldiers regain their strength, he added.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Siyad, the defense minister, said the U.S. was currently funding the salaries of around 1,800 Somali soldiers, and another 3,300 soldiers were being paid by other donors. However, that is only about half the 10,000 troops allowed under the peace agreement that formed the coalition government.

Other countries have contributed to training programs for security forces, notably France and Germany. A German-funded training course for 900 Somali police recently ended in Ethiopia, a Western official in Nairobi said, but there are fears the trainees will desert because no provision has been made for their salaries.

Some international payments are channeled through a fund administered by PricewaterhouseCoopers, an arrangement designed to prevent the mass theft of salaries and combat a desertion rate of up to 90 percent that scuttled a previous U.N. effort to reform the police force.

However, diplomats complain the lists of soldiers the government has provided differ from those they have been authorized to pay. Officers including Gen. Ahamad Buraale, who is in charge of Camp Jazira, also say PricewaterhouseCoopers has been slow to issue the identity cards that allow soldiers to be paid.

The firm declined to comment, citing a confidentiality agreement with its clients.

"We only have anecdotal information but those reports indicate that the desertion rate has been very low among those trained in Djibouti. For those trained in Uganda, the problem has not been desertion but reassignment from that trained unit to other duties such as

personal protection for government senior leaders,” said a State Department spokesman in an e-mail.

Siyad said it is vital that the 2,000 Somali soldiers slated to undergo six months of training in Uganda be paid. The European Union will take the lead in training, while the U.S. has pledged to pay the salaries of graduates until January, said Patrick Geyson, a political adviser to the EU program.

“Both the police and soldiers need to feed their families,” Geyson said. “They need to be paid every month. Otherwise they have to find other solutions.”

Guaranteeing longer-term wages for the soldiers may be difficult. Many donors are reluctant to contribute money to an army once notorious for crimes such as rape, kidnapping and murder.

The new army commander is seen by international officials as a vast improvement over the previous one, a warlord who used the army as a clan militia to extort money from civilians. But donors remain wary.

In the meantime, the Somali government is forced to rely on donor nations that are often slow to pay, undercutting soldiers’ confidence in regular paychecks, and feeding desertions and corruption. There are few signs Somalia’s government will ever be able to deliver social services, shape military strategy and pay its army on its own.

Siyad said the success of the multimillion-dollar training programs funded by American and European taxpayers is completely dependent on being able to pay the graduates.

“If this is not done, then we shouldn’t even start. Otherwise the soldiers will just join the opposition,” he said.

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