

Somalia: sins of omission

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The true story behind the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, the US bombardment of the country and the instalment of the pro-Western and secular transitional government has yet to be told, writes Gamal Nkrumah

Events in Somalia have been set in motion by the Ethiopian invasion of the sprawling Horn of Africa. It was patent that an Ethiopian invasion would lead to an instant and catastrophic conflagration of the Islamist military strongholds in Somalia. Ominously, the United States intervened militarily in Somalia for the first time since 1993. It was a humiliating debacle for the US in which the late Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed masterminded America's most disastrous firefight loss since the Vietnam War — code-named Black Hawk Down. Ironically, Aideed's son, Hussein, now interior minister of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), welcomed American intervention with open arms. He is, after all, an American citizen.

In the Somali capital Mogadishu, the TFG of President Abdallah Youssef is widely regarded as a stooge of the Americans and their Ethiopian beneficiaries. President Youssef and his Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi are widely seen as yes-men of Addis Ababa and Washington. Indeed, there is no way they could have triumphantly stormed Mogadishu without superior Ethiopian and American military might. Ethiopia, a country of 75 million people, has Africa's largest standing army. It is also an impressive battle-hardened force.

Thousands of Mogadishu residents demonstrated against the American air attack on southern Somalia which claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent Somalis. They also protested against the military presence of the Ethiopians in the Somali capital.

Public resentment is rife and Mogadishu, a former stronghold of the Council of Islamic Courts (CICs), is teetering on the brink of civil war. Already, the discredited and much loathed warlords have returned to the capital and their militiamen, notorious for their thievery and gangster-like bravado, are looting property and are engaged in indiscriminate killings.

Popular discontent with the TFG has reached a crescendo. Already Ethiopian and TFG troops have come under attack from unidentified gunmen, suspected of being sympathisers of the CICs.

Even the Americans acknowledge that the CICs had managed to run war-torn Somalia effectively. The Somalia Contact Group meeting in the Kenyan capital Nairobi was superseded by US airstrikes by the AC-130 gunships on the southern extremities of Somalia on Tuesday and Wednesday: the US bombardment of Hayo, Afmadow and Ras Kambona near the Kenyan border. The area is impenetrable equatorial and mangrove forests. The awesome firepower of the AC-130 with infrared and radar sensors that find and track targets are reported to have caused serious civilian casualties.

The US claims that it was after three suspected terrorists: Fazul Abdullah Mohamed — a most wanted man in the US; Abu Talha Al-Sudani, and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan. These men are suspected of having taken part in the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar Es-Salam.

The Islamists were too stiff-necked to liberalise their regime or to admit the TFG to their confidence. Rather, they were making reconciliatory overtures while strengthening ties with militant Islamist movements the world over.

The hard fact is that the international community at large, Somalia's neighbours and the US are fearful of the ramifications of a strategically-located country under the hegemony of Islamist militants — the CICs. The aim of the attack was to send a warning signal to the CICs' sympathisers. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zennawi had long warned that the CICs worked in conjunction with Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist organisations.

"The [Ethiopian] government has attempted to explore all options for peace. Thus, it has met with the representative of the terrorist leadership of the United Islamic Courts (UICs) in Djibouti in an effort to convince them to evict anti-Ethiopian forces from areas under their control, to halt sheltering and smuggling them into Ethiopia and to renounce the war they declared against Ethiopia," Meles Zennawi explained.

"We do not have any intention or desire to interfere in Somali politics beyond support delivered within the framework of the AU. Emanating from our strong belief that it is the right of the Somali people alone to determine the political future of Somalia, our defense force will pull out from Somalia immediately upon successful completion of its mission," he stressed.

Is an Islamist-governed Somalia really something to worry about? "The [Somalia contact] group clearly felt it was important that there not be a security vacuum," said US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer in Nairobi. She conceded that the CICs did an admirable job of administering the Somali capital Mogadishu and the other areas under its control. The UN Security Council authorised an African peacekeeping force to bolster the TFG — resolution 1725 of December 2006.

Such advice gets short shrift from militant Islamists. Al-Qaeda's number two man Ayman El-Zawahri urged Islamist militants to launch attacks against Ethiopian troops.

Yemen's Foreign Minister Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi announced that Somali Islamist leaders were in neighbouring Yemen to speed up Somali peace talks. There are an estimated one million Somali refugees in Yemen and Kenya. And, Jendayi Frazer stressed that some form of cooperation with the CICs is essential for the smooth-running of Somalia.

Frazer didn't visit the Somali capital Mogadishu as scheduled for security reasons. She would have been the first US official to set foot in Somalia since the 1994 debacle when the US withdrew all its diplomats in the country. It is not as if the CICs has meandered so far off track. The TFG may not be able to govern, but it has acquired plenty of negative power.

The Islamists questioned the TFG's patriotism repeatedly, but they did evade the invading Ethiopian forces.

A war of manoeuvre was in any case out of the question. The CICs were determined they would stand and fight on home ground. It is clear that the CICs will resort to guerilla warfare.

Yet amid all this hyperbole and scare-mongering, there is the real danger that Somalia will become like Afghanistan and Iraq — countries occupied by foreign powers with a restive population where insurgencies abound. But for the moment at least, the Ethiopians and the Americans hold temporary sway.

Secular Ethiopia cannot deal with religiosity, and the Somalis' reluctance to comply with the TFG's

mandate to disarm bodes ill. From the perspective of many Somalis the TFG's is a bad system just made worse.

The Islamist resistance had petered out and the heart went out of the Islamist warlords. Everyone thought that they would stand and fight on their home ground and not evade invading forces.

P.S.

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