

BREAKING: Horn of Africa: US Proxy War in Somalia Veers Towards Regional Conflict

Ethiopia's anticipated invasion marks scramble for territory with Kenyan rival

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The conflict in Somalia has been raised to dramatically higher stakes at the weekend after Ethiopian troops occupied a central town, routing Al Shabab militants in fighting that claimed dozens of lives.

The Ethiopian military entered the town of Beledweyne near its border on Saturday morning along with Somali troops belonging to the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government. The latter has been battling with Al Shabab Islamic militants for the past two years, but has only managed to maintain tenuous control of the capital, Mogadishu. Large areas of the country, especially to the south, have been under the command of the militants.

Earlier reports of Ethiopian troops having invaded Somalia with heavy armour were denied by the government in Addis Ababa. But the weekend offensive now confirms Ethiopia's involvement in its neighbour to the east.

Almost every country in the Horn of Africa has a military presence in war-torn Somalia. In mid-October Kenyan forces mounted a large-scale invasion of Somalia with thousands of troops backed up with tanks and fighter jets. Nearly three months on, Kenyan forces are still battling with Al Shabab militants mainly in the territory south of Mogadishu on Kenya's north-eastern border.

Last month, a contingent of troops from Djibouti arrived in Mogadishu, officially welcomed by the Somali government to join forces from Burundi and Uganda, which have been present in Somalia for the past two years as part of an African Union (AU) "peacekeeping mission" to combat the militants.

In addition to these contingencies is the involvement of the United States and France. Washington and Paris have given military support to the Kenyan and AU forces. American aerial attack drones and French naval firepower have coordinated with the Kenyan ground assault.

A week before Djibouti troops were dispatched to Somalia, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Djibouti where he warned about "key terror nodes in Yemen and Somalia".

Ethiopia is also a close Washington ally. The government in Addis Ababa was given the green light by then President Bush to invade Somalia in 2006 in a bid to oust the Islamic Courts Union that was in power then.

The latest intervention by Ethiopia is unlikely to have been sanctioned without Washington's clearance.

Superficially, it would appear that Washington is orchestrating a multi-prong offensive against the Somali militants. The US agenda has little to do with fighting terrorism and is motivated by geopolitical concern to assert control over the strategically important East African country. The country has been wracked by conflict for the past two decades ever since the US-backed Siad Barre dictatorship was overthrown in 1991.

With its coastline overlooking the key oil routes of the Gulf of Yemen and Red Sea, the US has been vexed by Somalia's relentless instability – instability that has been largely engendered by Washington's proxy warmongering in the region. The US-backed government in Mogadishu, which is accused of corruption and misrule, has proven incapable of decisively controlling the country. Even with generous aid from Washington and military support from neighbouring US-backed states, including the presence of US mercenaries, the government in Mogadishu can only but cling on to its central seat of power.

The entry of forces from Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti could be seen as Washington trying to ratchet up the military pressure on Al Shabab.

But of deeper concern is that US proxy war-making in East Africa could be stoking up nationalist rivalries that may backfire in a regional war between the various players who so far appear to be on the same side, that is, in doing Washington's dirty work against Al Shabab.

In recent years Ethiopia's regional leadership has been challenged by the rise of Kenya. Both countries share borders with Somalia and, historically preceding colonial demarcations, both lay claim to adjacent Somali territories. When Kenyan forces invaded Somalia in October, there was a marked diplomatic silence from Ethiopia. Ethiopia had suffered a humiliating defeat when it carried out its US-backed military gambit in Somalia in 2006. With the US latterly turning to Kenya as its favoured proxy there seemed to be a certain chagrin felt in Addis Ababa.

While appearing to do Washington's bidding against Al Shabab, political sources in Kenya have told Global Research that Nairobi's agenda is to annex a large swathe of Somalia's southern Jubbaland territory, historically known as Azania. There have also been reports of Kenyan politicians surreptitiously striking oil deals with French company Total in this part of Somalia. Another crucial natural resource for Kenya in that territory is the acquisition of freshwater, which Kenya is in short supply of.

With Somalia's territorial integrity at risk from 20 years of internecine violence and lawlessness – despite Washington's efforts to shore up the federal government – it can be seen as only a matter of time before Ethiopia would join in a scramble for neighbouring land. It is significant that the latest invasion by Ethiopia has targeted the central part of Somalia, the south already being assailed by Kenyan forces.

So far, Washington's orchestration of conflict in Somalia may appear as a smart bid for neocolonial control. But the real danger is when the deep-seated regional rivalries of Washington's proxies start to clash at close quarters. And given the desperate need for natural resources in this famine-prone region, the stakes of any resultant all-out conflict take on even greater urgency and mordancy.

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