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Massacre in Mogadishu—war crime made in the USA

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The brutal military siege against the Somali capital of Mogadishu constitutes a war crime for which the US government bears the principal responsibility.

While the mass media in the US itself has largely averted its eyes from the carnage, Ethiopian military units, backed and advised by Washington, have unleashed an intense bombardment of Mogadishu's crowded and impoverished urban neighborhoods, killing and wounding thousands and turning hundreds of thousands more into homeless refugees.

This latest round of fighting has pitted the US-backed Ethiopian forces and, in a lesser role, forces loyal to the so-called Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of former warlord Abdullahi Yusuf against supporters of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which had administered the city and much of southern Somalia before the US-backed Ethiopian invasion last December. The siege follows a similar Ethiopian offensive against Mogadishu three weeks ago in which more than 1,000 people were killed, the great majority of them—then as now—civilians.

Long-range artillery, tanks and helicopter gunships have conducted ceaseless and indiscriminate shelling of the city for nearly a week and a half. Much of the capital lies in ruins, while hospitals, schools and housing have not been spared.

On Wednesday, four Ethiopian rockets tore through the SOS Children's Villages hospital in Mogadishu, one of them destroying a ward housing 20 people previously wounded in the attacks.

"We deplore the indiscriminate shelling of a medical facility," UNICEF Representative in Somalia Christian Balslev-Olesen said in response to the attack. "It is an action that is totally unacceptable and one for which no justification can be given. Where is the accountability in this conflict? Every day thousands of displaced people—most of them women and children—are living a nightmare of violence."

Reports from the city tell of rotting corpses littering the streets, with people unable to collect the dead for several days because of the constant threat from the shelling. Only on Friday, during a lull in the fighting that followed the apparent seizure of Mogadishu's northern suburbs by the Ethiopian forces, could residents begin to retrieve the dead.

Meanwhile, at least 350,000 people—a number that could swell to more than half a million—have fled the fighting, many of them camping outside Mogadishu without adequate water, food or medicine. Relief officials warn that the outbreak of epidemics could claim many more lives. Reportedly, at least 600 have died already as a result of cholera and other diseases.

Ali Mohamed Gedi, the prime minister in the US-backed transitional government, claimed Friday, "We have won the fighting against the insurgents," meaning that the Ethiopian forces that are the TFG's central pillar of support had conquered the city. Western diplomats and other observers were skeptical of this claim, predicting that fighting will continue as long as the Ethiopian troops remain.

Gedi claimed that Ethiopian and pro-government forces were now working to suppress "pockets of resistance" and vowed, "We will capture any remaining terrorists who have escaped."

The TFG and its Ethiopian backers routinely refer to those resisting them as "terrorists" and elements of al-Qaeda, a claim that serves to justify the atrocities being carried out in Somalia as part of the US-led "global war on terror."

In reality, the fighting has largely erupted along clan lines, with members of the Hawiye clan—the majority population in the capital—resisting the imposition of the TFG, dominated by the Darod clan of its president, Yusuf, by the army of his long-time ally, the repressive regime in Ethiopia.

The Islamic Courts administration had won wide popular support by restoring relative peace and security to the Somali capital after the sporadic violence that has dominated the country since the overthrow of the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991. The courts had driven out the warlords responsible for much of the mayhem, and now they are returning with US and Ethiopian support.

Hostility to the Ethiopian forces runs deep, stemming from the brutal 1977 war between Somalia and Ethiopia over the disputed Ogaden region, which inflicted heavy casualties and turned millions into refugees.

Washington backed the Ethiopian invasion last December on the grounds that the Islamic Courts represented the spread of radical Islamist forces in the strategic Horn of Africa and were harboring al-Qaeda activists implicated in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

US warplanes carried out bombings in southern Somalia under the pretext of attacking “terrorists.” While these raids killed a number of civilians, there is no evidence that anyone linked to al-Qaeda was struck in the attacks.

US Special Forces troops were also sent into Somalia to direct Ethiopian operations. These American forces remain embedded within the Ethiopian military, making Washington directly and intimately responsible for the bloodbath that has been carried out over the past several weeks.

The French press agency AFP quoted Mogadishu residents reporting that joint patrols of Ethiopian troops and pro-TFG gunmen are sweeping through the northern neighborhoods of the city rounding up young men as suspected insurgents.

“They are moving from house to house arresting people,” said Ibrahim Sheikh Mao, a resident of the Suuqahoola area where much of the fighting took place. “I imagine they have arrested hundreds of people because they started the operation early in the morning.”

Shamsu Nur, a woman in the al-Kamin area added, “All the men are fleeing the houses because Ethiopian forces are arresting them. I have seen three men near my house being taken by Ethiopian forces. I do not know if they were fighters, but they looked like civilians.” AFP said that its reporter in Mogadishu had seen 20 Somali men being herded into an Ethiopian military truck.

Clearly, there is an immediate threat of bloody reprisals against Mogadishu’s inhabitants.

Hundreds of those detained so far in the conflict have been shipped to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Abba. As the *Washington Post* reported Thursday, “More than 200 FBI and CIA agents have set up camp in the Sheraton Hotel here in Ethiopia’s capital and have been interrogating dozens of detainees—including a US citizen—picked up in Somalia and held without charge and without attorneys in a secret prison somewhere in this city....” Human rights groups have described the operation as a kind of “decentralized Guantanamo” in the Horn of Africa, and undoubtedly the same kind of abuses and torture used elsewhere in the “war on terrorism” are taking place there as well.

The bloody events in Mogadishu—which have provoked little if any controversy in Washington—are another warning that the war in Iraq is only one front in a global eruption of US militarism, as the American government employs armed force to seize control of strategic resources and regions.

The recklessness and brutality of this campaign threatens to ignite a far wider regional war, which could well draw in US combat troops. Already, the State Department has fingered the government of Eritrea—which is in a tense border dispute with Ethiopia—as a supposed “state sponsor” of those resisting the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia. Fighting within Somalia itself has spread to Kismayo, where rival clans have battled for control of the city.

Some 160,000 refugees have poured into Kenya, further destabilizing the situation there. And, on Tuesday, Somali minority rebels carried out a deadly attack on an oil installation in the Ethiopian-controlled Ogaden region, killing 74 people, including 9 Chinese.

The government of Ethiopia has claimed that it wants to withdraw its 20,000 troops and hand over security operations to a multinational force organized by the African Union. The AU, however, has proven incapable of mobilizing more than a handful of troops, and few African governments appear willing to send their armies into this dubious US-instigated conflict.