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Bombings kill 62 in Somalia amid escalating US scramble for Africa

The US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM) claimed on Monday to have killed 62 members of the al-Shabab Islamist militia in a series of six airstrikes over the weekend in a coastal region south of Somalia's capital of Mogadishu.

The bombings were only the latest in a steadily escalating US air war in Somalia. They follow a pair of air strikes last month that the Pentagon claimed killed 37 al-Shabab members, a strike in October that it said claimed the lives of 60 fighters and another in November of last year that supposedly killed around 100.

In the latest bombing, as in all those that have preceded it, the Pentagon insisted that there were no "collateral" civilian casualties, following a longstanding ground rule that anyone killed by American bombs and missiles is by definition a targeted militant.

Somalia is one of the shadow wars that Washington is waging in Africa, with little or no information provided to the public, much less even a shred of popular approval.

In the latest attacks, AFRICOM reported that US warplanes carried out four strikes on December 15, leaving 34 people dead, and another two strikes on December 16 that killed 28.

The latest strikes bring the total for this year to 46, a significant rise over the 31 carried out last year, which was itself double the number conducted in 2016.

The Trump administration introduced sweeping changes to the rules of engagement in Somalia, casting aside previous restraints on bombing and other operations.

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In addition to the air war, AFRICOM maintains a force of 500 US special operations troops on the ground in Somalia, its largest combat deployment on the continent. These troops participate in search-and-kill operations together with Somali government forces.

In addition, some 20,000 troops from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Burundi operate in Somalia under the auspices of the African Union and in conjunction with the US military operation.

Despite this array of military power, al-Shabab continues to hold sway over vast swathes of the country's rural areas and is able to make frequent attacks throughout Somalia.

The government that the US is attempting to prop up in Mogadishu is riddled with corruption and crises, pretending to preside over a society that has been left shattered by a quarter of a century of US imperialist intervention.

In the week before the latest US airstrikes, the town of Baidoa, the capital of the southwestern Bay region of Somalia, was the scene of bloody clashes between protesters on the one side and Ethiopian troops and Somali security forces on the other that have left at least eight people dead, including one local legislator and a 10-year-old child.

The protests broke out after Ethiopian troops arrested Muhktar Robow, the former second-in-command of al-Shabab, who quit the group and became the leading candidate for the presidency of the southwestern state in what is the first of a series of regional elections. According to reports, he was tortured, flown to Mogadishu and imprisoned there.

Ethiopian troops are reported to have occupied Baidoa, driving tanks through residential neighborhoods.

The clashes are only the sharpest expression of the breakdown of relations between the central government in Mogadishu and the regional administrations, which have largely cut off cooperation with the capital as a result of multiple conflicts.

Meanwhile, in Mogadishu itself, legislators earlier this month initiated impeachment proceedings against President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo charging him with signing "secret deals" with Ethiopia and Eritrea and acting unilaterally in the appointment of military commanders and judges. The lawmakers also accused the president of abusing his powers by authorizing the unlawful rendition of a leader of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), Muse Qalbi Dhagah, a Somali national, from Somalia to Ethiopia.

The intensive US air strikes in Somalia came on the heels of Washington's unveiling of a new policy in which the operations of AFRICOM, whose ranks have swelled to 7,500—

compared to about 6,000 in 2017—are being overtly developed from the standpoint of Africa as an arena of great power conflict.

Until now, AFRICOM's operations, which involve deployments of US forces in virtually every country of the continent, have been cast as part of the “global war on terrorism.” The strategy outlined last Thursday by US National Security Adviser John Bolton, however, placed counter-terrorism as Washington's “second priority,” eclipsed by the imperative of confronting “great power competitors, namely China and Russia.”

Bolton's rabid address, delivered before the right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation, indicted both Beijing and Moscow for pursuing “predatory practices” that “threaten the financial independence of African nations; inhibit opportunities for US investment; interfere with US military operations; and pose a significant threat to US national security interests.”

The thrust of Bolton's speech was that China and Russia have been poaching—with considerable success—on territory that Washington views as its own semi-colonial preserve.

In particular, the national security adviser laid stress on the Horn of Africa and its strategic location on the shores of the route for much of the world's seaborne oil traffic from the Middle East to Asia. He called attention to the building of a Chinese military base in Djibouti, just miles from where AFRICOM has its own main base on the continent, and on a proposed deal that would place Djibouti's main Red Sea port facility under the management of a Chinese company, saying that this would shift “the balance of power in the Horn of Africa” in China's favor.

In what was undoubtedly the most laughable segment of Bolton's speech, he vowed that Washington would carefully review and substantially reduce its aid programs to African countries, vowing that it would not “fund corrupt autocrats, who use the money to fill their coffers at the expense of their people or commit gross human rights violations.”

This from a government that has provided unconditional defense of the Saudi monarchy, supporting its genocidal war in Yemen and covering up for its brutal murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside its Istanbul consulate. One would never guess from Bolton's sanctimonious speech that Washington has been the principal prop for African dictatorships, from that of Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo onward.

Bolton's speech, and the savage intensification of the US assault on Somalia constitute a warning: US imperialism views Africa as a battlefield in its global bid to employ military aggression as a means of defending its hegemony over every region of the planet. To the

extent it faces challenges in terms of trade and investment from Russia and China, it will respond with intensified militarism, with the peoples of Africa suffering the consequences.