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US expands military offensive in Somalia

Since the beginning of the year, the US has rapidly expanded its forces and significantly ramped up its military offensive in Somalia, conducting at least 28 air strikes in 2017. By comparison, 13 such air strikes were carried out in 2016, and five during 2015.

On Tuesday, AFRICOM stated that a US air strike killed more than 100 at a training camp purportedly belonging to the Somali-based Al-Shabaab militia. The air strike impacted an area around 125 miles northwest of capital city Mogadishu. US officials claimed the strike was carried out at the request of the US-backed Federal Transitional Government (FTG).

Speaking on the US pretext for the attack, a spokesperson from AFRICOM told the media, “Al-Shabaab has publicly committed to planning and conducting attacks against the US and our partners in the region.”

The attack is part of the broader US campaign against Al-Shabaab, in which the US has carried out repeated drone strikes against militants in the several weeks since a truck bombing in central Mogadishu by Al-Shabaab killed over 350. Increased air strikes augment a ramped-up military offensive by the Trump administration in the Horn of Africa.

The expanded campaign comes with new rules of engagement enacted by the Trump administration in March, granting broad authority to US forces to conduct open-ended warfare. These loosened restrictions on rules that were ostensibly in place to protect the civilian population from US bombardment make it clear that Washington is preparing for a dramatically expanded military offensive in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab maintains a strong presence in the center and south of the country, but has steadily lost ground since 2011, when US-backed forces from the African Union routed the militia that had taken control over most of Mogadishu.

In deploying the largest contingent of US military troops in the country since 1993, AFRICOM has increased its troops in Somalia to more than 500 soldiers. In launching an all-out offensive in the country, the deployment includes special operations personnel, including Green Berets and Navy Seals, the elite commandos known for carrying out US imperialism's gravest crimes.

For its part, the Pentagon sought to downplay the significance of the increased troop levels. Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Politico, "I would not associate that with a buildup, as you're calling it. I think it's just the flow of forces in and out as different organizations come in that might be sized a little differently, and I certainly don't think there's a ramp-up of attacks."

Despite this, the increased number of US troops taken together with more than twice the number of air strikes over the previous year constitutes a significant expansion of the American military campaign in the country.

Robyn Mack, spokesperson for AFRICOM, said, "[The larger] advise and assist mission [is now] the most significant element of our partnership [in Somalia]."

For the better part of a decade, the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab militia has sought to topple the US-backed government in Mogadishu. The US, in carrying out its offensive against the militia, has been augmented by over 22,000 troops from the African Union, consisting of forces from several African countries, together with the Somali army. The African Union mission, called AMISOM, having officially lead the US-backed offensive since 2007, is set to withdraw its forces in December 2020.

Retired Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, who headed AFRICOM until June, spoke of the expansion to Politico: "We had to put more small teams on the ground to partner in a regional way with the Somali government. So we changed our strategy and we changed our operational approach. That's why the footprint went up."

AFRICOM's expansion follows the template set in 2016 in the northern Somali region of Puntland, when AFRICOM deployed elite soldiers to assist the Somali army in routing ISIS militants who had taken control of the city of Qandala.

Outlining Washington's strategy as a move toward a more proactive military offensive in the country, Bolduc said, "Puntland was the example we used. We said, 'We can do this in the other areas.' So we changed our strategy and we changed our operational approach."

Being more specific, Bolduc said, “Do we get into contact with the enemy? Yes, we do—our partners do and we’re there to support it, and sometimes we come into contact by virtue of how the enemy attacked them.” Bolduc went on, “Taking out high-value targets is necessary, but it’s not going to lead you to strategic success, and it’s not going to build capability and capacity in our partners to secure themselves. So we provided a plan that complemented the kinetic strikes.”

Since the end of the Mohamed Siad Barre dictatorship in 1991, the US has been engaged in an effort to secure a puppet regime in Mogadishu. The consequent decades of war and conflict stoked by US imperialism have left the country in complete disarray, with the population experiencing conditions of mass deprivation and misery.

According to UN figures, more than half the population does not have access to clean water sources, and 73 percent are completely impoverished. Due to the destruction of vital infrastructure, the Somali masses have been deprived of access to decent health care and education.

The US-backed FTG government has no popular support anywhere in the country, and is viewed with outright hostility by the majority of Somalis. The military offensive and drone strikes carried out by the US and its proxy forces have killed thousands of Somalis. The consequent destruction of Somali society has led to the emergence of Al-Shabaab.

The American military expansion in the Horn of Africa must be seen in the context of China’s far-reaching and expanding economic influence on the continent, together with Beijing’s recent opening of a navy base in Djibouti, which has provoked Washington’s ire. Washington is seeking to neutralize Beijing’s influence by military force.

In establishing its first overseas base, some five miles from the joint US/French military base Camp Lemonnier, Beijing agreed to pay the Djibouti government \$100 million per year. Beijing claimed the base is merely a “logistics facility.”

Last week, China’s POLY-GCL Petroleum Group signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of Djibouti to invest \$4 billion in a natural gas project at Damerjog near the border with Somalia. In six months, the company will begin construction on the project, which includes a pipeline, a liquefaction plant, and an export terminal. The pipeline is projected to transport 12 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year from Ethiopia to Djibouti.

China Railway Group and China Civil Engineering Construction Corp (CCECC) have financed 70 percent of the construction for an electrified Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, the first such cross-border railway on the continent. The commercial rail line connects

Ethiopia's capital with the Red Sea port in Djibouti, and carries 90 percent of the trade from Ethiopia's goods.