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New bases extend US's drone war

By Jim Lobe

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WASHINGTON - As Somalia undergoes its worst famine in six decades and Yemen slides into civil war, the administration of President Barack Obama is expanding its network of bases to carry out drone strikes against suspected terrorists in both countries, according to reports published in two major United States newspapers on Thursday.

Based in part on newly disclosed US diplomatic cables recently posted by WikiLeaks, the Washington Post reported that the US military had been flying armed drones over both countries from a base in Djibouti and was planning to build a second base in Ethiopia.

The Post and the Wall Street Journal also reported that a base in the Seychelles that the US military has previously used to fly surveillance drones will now host armed drones capable of flying their lethal payloads the more than 1,500 kilometers that separate the Indian Ocean island chain from Somalia and the African mainland and back.

The "constellation" of drone bases will also include a secret new Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) base that the administration announced earlier this year would be situated somewhere on the Arabian Peninsula.

That facility will be hosted by Saudi Arabia, according to an unnamed "senior US military official" quoted in a FoxNews.com report also published on Thursday.

"Operations in Saudi [Arabia] are [the] only new expansion to this plan," the official was quoted as saying. "The rest has been working for over a year when we long ago realized danger from AQAP [al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula]," a Yemen-based affiliate which, according to recent statements by US intelligence officials, has been consolidating links with al-Shabaab, the Somali group which Washington claims also has ties to al-Qaeda.

Inter Press Service (IPS) calls to the Pentagon press office for confirmation that Saudi Arabia was hosting the new base were not returned. But a former US ambassador to Riyadh who has retained good ties with its government, Admiral Chas Freeman (retired), said the report was "highly plausible" given both the "close and robust" cooperation on counter-terrorism between the US and the kingdom and its geographical proximity to Yemen.

According to one of the authors of the Post report, the expanding network is designed to "avoid the mistakes of the past".

"When al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002, it took years before the CIA had assembled a drone program capable of putting the terrorist network under pressure," wrote Greg Miller on the Post's website. "That delay, and costly deals for air-basing access in neighboring countries, allowed al-Qaeda to flourish."

The reports come amid considerable controversy about the increased use by the Obama administration of armed drones, ominously named Predators, and the longer-range Reapers, in its counter-terrorism campaign.

In Pakistan, where the CIA greatly sharply increased unilateral drone strikes - to nearly 200 - against "high-value" al-Qaeda and Taliban targets in the first two years of the Obama administration, the tactic has contributed heavily to an increase in anti-Americanism. An overwhelming 97% of respondents in a recent Pew Research Center poll in Pakistan, where anti-Americanism is at an all-time high, said they viewed drone attacks negatively.

Indeed, none other than Obama's first top intelligence chief, Admiral Dennis Blair (retired), told an elite gathering of foreign policy and national security wonks in July that it was a mistake "to have [an air-only] campaign dominate our overall relations" with Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

"Because we're alienating the countries concerned, because we're treating countries just as places where we go attack groups that threaten us, we are threatening the prospects of long-term reform," he said. Such strikes should only be carried out with the consent of the host government.

But Obama's new Pentagon chief and former CIA director Leon Panetta rejected that criticism, insisting that the tactic had been and would continue to be "effective at undermining al-Qaeda and their ability to plan attacks [against the US]".

Panetta and the Pentagon have also reportedly led the charge in an ongoing debate within the administration to broaden the current target list in Yemen and Somalia from high-level leaders of

AQAP and al-Shabaab, who are presumed to share al-Qaeda's global aims, to include low-level foot soldiers, whose motivation for joining such groups may be more parochial and less ambitious.

The drone has increasingly become the administration's "weapon of choice" in its efforts to subdue al-Qaeda and its affiliates, although it has been used far less frequently against targets in Yemen and Somalia than in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

At least six drone strikes targeted alleged militants in Yemen in 2010 and 2011, but that number may have risen recently due to the collapse amid the ongoing political turmoil of the central government's authority over various parts of the country. Militias that Washington believes are tied to AQAP have taken control of towns near the Gulf of Aden.

"There's an assumption that the US has used a lot of aerial strikes in recent months, but it's difficult to get verification," said Gregory Johnson, a Yemen expert at Princeton University.

In Somalia, where Washington has also used cruise missiles and heliborne Special Operations Forces (SOF) against senior al-Shabaab leaders, there are believed to have been only two drones strikes since 2007.

According to the Post and Journal accounts, Washington used a base in the Seychelles in 2009 and 2010 to fly drones for surveillance of both Somalia and Somali piracy activity in the Indian Ocean. According to the WikiLeaks cables cited by the Post, Seychelles President James Michel has concurred with the idea of arming the drones.

Somalia's Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali told the Journal that he did not object to armed drone attacks on members of al-Shabaab, provided that such operations were coordinated with his government, but that he opposed attacks on pirates.

The Post reported that the US had negotiated with Ethiopia, with which Washington also cooperates closely on counter-terrorism activities, for four years over building a base for armed drones on its territory. Fox News reported that the US had flown surveillance drones from several Ethiopian bases.

"There could certainly be a lot of internal discussion before they would agree to authorize the use of a base [for armed drones]," said David Shinn, a former US ambassador to Addis Ababa. "They don't want to be seen as a pawn of anyone."

Shinn, who teaches at George Washington University, said the use of armed drones should be highly constrained and warned against its becoming "the default policy for dealing with Somalia".

"I don't see a problem with using an aerial strike with a couple of huge caveats," he told IPS. "First, that you have intelligence which is 95% accurate or better on a high value target - which is a pretty tough standard - and, second, that there's little or no likelihood of collateral damage. If you're using these things willy-nilly on the basis of not very good intelligence, then it will be

counter-productive."

Johnson voiced similar caution, noting that "Washington has drifted into this tactic, because it can't seem to find any other good options in Yemen".

"But it runs the very real risk of actually exacerbating the situation," he noted. "The problem with drones is that the US doesn't have a very good track record on killing who it's aiming at in Yemen. So it often ends up killing civilians, which drives their brothers, fathers, sons, nephews, etc into the hands of al-Qaeda and makes it easier for al-Qaeda to argue that Yemen is an active theater of jihad, no different from Iraq or Afghanistan."

He also expressed concern about the CIA building a base in Saudi Arabia. "One of the primary motivations for Osama bin Laden's jihad against the US were military bases housing US troops in Saudi Arabia after the end of the Gulf War [in 1991]," he wrote on his blog, Waq al-Waq. "Does the US think this current of thought no longer holds sway in Arabia?