

## **Ethiopian forces take second town in Somalia with 5,000 soldiers**

By Steve Bloomfield, Africa Correspondent

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Ethiopian troops moved further into Somalia yesterday, opening a new front in the American-led "war on terror". An estimated 5,000 Ethiopian soldiers are believed to be inside Somalia, protecting the weak transitional government from an Islamist force that controls half the country.

The US does not want Somalia to fall into the hands of the Islamists; so far, regional observers point out, neither the US nor any other UN Security Council member has condemned the Ethiopian invasion.

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) - which defeated an alliance of US-backed warlords to take control of Mogadishu last month - boycotted proposed peace talks on Saturday. The Islamists, who are far more popular among ordinary Somalis than the fragile transitional government, are now expected to try to take control of the rest of the country.

The US has already tried once to defeat the Islamists and has repeatedly said it fears Somalia could become a safe haven for terrorists. Ethiopia fears an Islamist state on its doorstep and has invaded Somalia in the past. Its troops entered Somalia in 1996 to defeat Islamists who were backing a rebel group in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

Ethiopian troops entered Somalia again on Thursday and have been seen in the town of Baidoa, the seat of the transitional government. Over the weekend, they took control of a second town, Waajid.

One Somali analyst, based in Nairobi, said it is likely that the current invasion was supported by America. Ethiopia and the US "share a security agenda," he said. "There is a lot of military co-operation between the two countries. They have been carrying out joint exercises along the Ethiopian-Somali border, tracking suspected terrorists. Ethiopia certainly seems to be acting as if it has a free hand. We are at a tipping point right now. The Islamists would not be unhappy with a conflict. It is shaping up to be a zero-sum game - winner takes all."

Analysts throughout the region share this view. John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group has warned that the region is heading for "full-scale war".

Somalia has not had an effective central government for 15 years, since warlords overthrew the dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 and then turned on each other.

The likelihood of the conflict in Somalia becoming part of the war on terror appears high. Osama bin Laden, in his most recent tape recording, backed the UIC and said Somalia must remain Islamic. The new leader of the UIC, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, is on America's most-wanted list of terrorists and other senior members of the UIC are wanted by the US for involvement in the 1998 bombing of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Unconfirmed reports say that some of the UIC's troops are foreign, possibly having travelled across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen.

No love is lost between the two major players in Somalia. The president of the transitional government, Abdullahi Yusuf, and Sheikh Aweys fought each other in the mid-1990s in the Puntland region in central Somalia. Mr Yusuf succeeded then in expelling Sheikh Aweys from the region.

\* Gunmen have killed 682 civilians, including a Swedish journalist, in executions over the past year in Somalia, according to a report published yesterday by the Dr Ismael Jumale Human Rights Centre.

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