

How US forged an alliance with Ethiopia over invasion

From The Guardian

Xan Rice in Nairobi and Suzanne Goldenberg in Washington Saturday January 13, 2007

On December 4, General John Abizaid, the commander of US forces from the Middle East through Afghanistan, arrived in Addis Ababa to meet the Ethiopian prime minister, Meles Zenawi. Officially, the trip was a courtesy call to an ally. Three weeks later, however, Ethiopian forces crossed into Somalia in a war on its Islamist rulers, and this week the US launched air strikes against suspected al-Qaida operatives believed to be hiding among the fleeing Islamist fighters.

"The meeting was just the final handshake," said a former intelligence officer familiar with the region.

Washington and Addis Ababa may deny it, but the air strikes this week exposed close intelligence and military cooperation between Ethiopia and America, fuelled by mutual concern about the rise of Islamists in the chaos of Somalia.

Yesterday, the Washington Post reported that US military personnel entered southern Somalia this week to verify who was killed in Monday's air strike. It was the first known instance of US boots on the ground in Somalia since the Black Hawk Down catastrophe, when 18 US soldiers were killed by Somali militiamen, the paper claimed.

But Pentagon officials and intelligence analysts say a small number of US special forces were on the ground before Ethiopia's intervention in an operation planned since last summer, soon after the Islamic Courts Union took control of Mogadishu. Press reports have said US special forces also accompanied the Ethiopian troops crossing into Somalia.

The main cause of delay was the weather. Mark Schroeder, Africa analyst at the intelligence consulting firm Stratfor, said the critical turning point was the end of the rain season. "While Ethiopia could move small numbers of troops and trucks as a limited intervention into Somalia, they needed to wait until the ground dried up."

Once they did move in, the troops were accompanied by US special forces, analysts say. For America, the relationship with Ethiopia provides an extra pair of eyes in a region that it fears could become an arena for al-Qaida.

"The Ethiopians are the primary suppliers of intelligence," said one analyst. However, he said, it was almost inconceivable that the US would not have sent its special forces into Somalia ahead of the Ethiopian intervention. "You are going to want to have your own people on the ground."

In return, the US is believed to have provided the Ethiopians with arms, fuel and other logistical support for a much larger intervention than it has previously mounted in Somalia.

It has also made available satellite information and intelligence from friendly Somali clans, a former intelligence officer said. America's renewed interest in the Horn of Africa dates to November 2002 when the US military established its joint taskforce in Djibouti, now the base for 1,800 troops, including special operations forces.

By then, the west had good reason to fear that Africa had become an arena for al-Qaida, and that the failed state of Somalia could become a haven for the organisation's operatives.

The bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa gave cause for such fears. So too did al-Qaida documents retrieved from Afghanistan that spoke of the organisation's ambitions in the region, says Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University and the Council on Global Terrorism. "That this was a primary area of concern," he says.

In fact, says another analyst, the US was closely considering a strike on suspected al-Qaida cells in

Somalia as early as 2002. That idea was abandoned.

But America's concerns came to a head last year with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union. At first, Washington's response was relatively modest. It mounted a small CIA operation, run from Nairobi, to stand up Somalia's hated warlords against the Islamists, a former intelligence official familiar with the region says.

The under-the-radar approach was necessitated by the state department's opposition to any type of military intervention in Somalia. Until the middle of last year, diplomats remained hopeful of negotiations between the Somali government and the Islamic Courts Union. That position, promoted by the state department's top official for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, put diplomats on a collision course with the Pentagon.

By last June, when the Islamists seized Mogadishu, the Pentagon appeared to have won that bureaucratic struggle. By then, the CIA operation was widely acknowledged as a disaster. Talks on peace and power-sharing between the Somali president Abdullahi Yusuf's government and Islamic courts were foundering. A Somalia analyst in Nairobi said the Islamists took most of the blame - unfairly, in his view, as the government had no intention of ever sharing power. "My guess is that a decision to wage war was taken sometime in October by Ethiopia and America. That was when people close to Yusuf appeared dead convinced that the Seventh Cavalry was going to appear. We thought it was a pipedream. It wasn't."

As the build-up to war continued, with Ethiopia sending more troops into Somalia and the Islamists moving closer to the government base in Baidoa, experts say the cooperation between Addis and Washington increased sharply.

Help from the sea was also required. Landlocked Ethiopia has no naval capacity, but the US could easily move warships from the Gulf to the Somali coast - as happened once the conflict began.

By mid-December Jendayi Frazer, the state department's top official for Africa, was echoing the message from Addis Ababa about the dangers of the Islamic Courts Union. "The top layer of the courts are extremist to the core," she said. "They are terrorists and they are in control."

Days later, the Ethiopian forces were on the move. But many believe that America's support for Ethiopia's military intervention could come back to haunt the US, and predict a flare-up of Somali nationalist feeling. Already, clan fighting is threatening to jeopardise attempts to restore stability. This week there have been at least three attacks on government forces.

There is also concern that the precipitate flight of the ICU does not necessarily signal its definitive defeat. Last night, the Ethiopian-backed Somali government forces said they had captured the last remaining stronghold at Ras Kamboni, just two miles from the Kenyan border. It may not be the last confrontation between government forces and the Islamists.

"The Islamists have not all gone away. Many we believe continue to be in Mogadishu. They buried their weapons, and buried their uniforms, and they are lying low and letting the dust settle," Mr Schroeder says.