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## **Regional War May Loom in Africa**

*Strife Between Ethiopia, Islamic Group in Somalia Intensifies*

By Stephanie McCrummen

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — With the Ethiopian government saying it is technically at war with Somalia's Islamic Courts movement, and the movement having declared holy war against Ethiopia, there is fear that an all-out conflict in the Horn of Africa may be unavoidable.

In the past week, several skirmishes have broken out between militias loyal to Ethiopia and those loyal to the Council of Islamic Courts, the movement that has taken control of the southern region of the country, including Mogadishu, the capital.

The fighting has occurred around the southern town of Baidoa, seat of Somalia's fragile but internationally recognized transitional government. Ethiopia considers the interim government a buffer against Islamic Courts leaders who have long expressed desire to create a "Greater Somalia," including ethnically Somali portions of Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on Wednesday rejected a declaration by a leader of the Islamic movement that Ethiopia withdraw its troops or face war. Though the Ethiopian government has repeatedly denied having more than several hundred military trainers in Somalia, diplomats in the region estimate that at least 8,000 troops have poured in around Baidoa and that thousands more are gathering along the Somali border.

"This declaration is based on falsehoods," Meles said in an interview, adding that the movement, also known as the Islamic Courts Union, is "hellbent" on controlling all of Somalia. "Now, if the transitional government doesn't want our trainers, we're happy to withdraw them at any moment," he said.

The weak transitional government has made no such request.

For now, hopes for a peaceful resolution are pinned on a U.N. Security Council resolution adopted last week, authorizing deployment of an African Union force, excluding troops from neighboring states, to Baidoa. In theory, the resolution would remove Ethiopia from the volatile equation and encourage more moderate leaders within the Islamic movement to join the transitional government.

Some analysts, however, contend that the measure has already prompted the Islamic Courts to push toward Baidoa and will ultimately serve as a rallying point for the movement's more radical factions, which have said they would consider any African Union force a foreign invasion.

In any case, deployment could take months. The president of the transitional government has requested 8,000 African Union troops, though only one battalion of about 800 Ugandan troops is ready, according to African Union officials.

In question at the moment is whether the Islamic movement or Ethiopia will mount a full-fledged offensive before the African Union soldiers deploy, and whether the transitional government, which has spent much of its time exiled at the InterContinental Hotel in Nairobi, will simply disintegrate, leaving no internationally recognized government for the United Nations, or Ethiopia, to support.

"My feeling is that Ethiopia will go to war. . . . Their own security is at stake," a senior Kenyan diplomat said on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the situation. "Unfortunately, the [U.N.] resolution was sponsored by the United States, and it will be used by the Courts as a propaganda tool. But at least there's a window."

Besides fear of an Islamic government on its border, an increasingly authoritarian Ethiopian government is also concerned about radicalization of its own Muslim citizens, who now account for nearly 50 percent of the population. The government has accused the Islamic Courts of training and arming insurgent groups in the ethnically Somali region of Ethiopia called the Ogaden. The two countries have been to war over the area three times since Somalia's independence in 1960.

The situation unfolding in Somalia, a society of warring clans and sub-clans without a central government since dictator Mohamed Siad Barre fell in 1991, is one in which diplomats, analysts and others involved tend to agree on one point: that war would be disastrous, threatening to destabilize a region of great strategic import not only to Africa but also to the United States, because of its proximity to the Middle East and Red Sea shipping lanes.

A triple car bombing at a checkpoint outside Baidoa last month heightened those fears, with the transitional government blaming the attack on al-Qaeda sympathizers within the Islamic Courts, which denied responsibility. Some analysts say that even if Ethiopia, which has a predominantly Christian army, initially trounces Islamic Courts fighters in a war, the movement's more radical members might retaliate with suicide bombings and other terrorist-style attacks in neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti, where the United States has a significant military presence.

"I think if the ICU [Islamic Courts Union] suffers from defeat, it will only take months for them to regroup and it would strengthen them internally," said Matt Bryden, a consultant with the International Crisis Group, a policy research group. "If they are hit, there is a risk they would come back on steroids and pose a threat to the whole region."

Meles rejected that argument, saying the policy of dialogue and engagement has only bought the Islamic Courts movement time to expand its control.

"It surprises me that intelligent people at the dawn of the 21st century could claim that if you respond to terrorism with force, you spawn terrorism," he said. "But that if you appease them, you somehow tame them."

Since 1991, Somalia has held no fewer than 15 peace conferences aimed at cobbling together some sort of central government.

A U.S.-led attempt to stabilize the country led to the deaths of 18 American troops in an October 1993 battle depicted in the movie "Black Hawk Down." After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government was accused of bungling Somalia policy again by supporting warlords marketing themselves as an "anti-terrorism coalition," who generally terrorized Somalis who came to hate them.

The Islamic Courts, initially a grouping of local clerics, offered an alternative to that lawlessness, establishing an order based on Islamic law village by village, often persuading local militias to join them.

A recent U.N. study found that although the transitional government is supported by Ethiopia, among other countries, the Islamic Courts are receiving substantial assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, a claim some regional analysts contend is exaggerated.

Support for the Islamic movement by Eritrea, Ethiopia's neighbor and rival, appears to be a big part of Ethiopia's motivation. The Ethiopia-Eritrea proxy conflict in Somalia could ignite a regional conflagration and threaten U.S. anti-terrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa, according to a report due out this week from the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations. It describes "a general unraveling of U.S. foreign policy" in the region and calls for the United States to exert stronger pressure on the two countries to implement a U.S.-brokered border agreement.

The U.N. study found that the Islamic Courts group has also raised money from various Arab states and the Somali diaspora. Relatively quickly, the movement established an efficient system of taxation and social welfare programs that enabled businesses to function and that seem to have earned support among Somalis, even if many in the traditionally moderate country are uneasy with the harsher aspects of Islamic law. At the same time, the movement has been backed by a more radical military wing called the shebab, made up of young men raised in a chaotic country awash with weapons, and indoctrinated with the ideology of holy war.

Both the United States and Ethiopia have accused the Islamic Courts of harboring suspects in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and other attacks. Movement officials have denied that, accusing both countries of waging a propaganda war.

Diplomats and analysts differ sharply on whether Islamic Courts leaders such as Sheik Hassan Aweys are genuinely striving for legitimacy or cynically concealing a radical agenda.

"The Courts are not monolithic" said Mario Raffaelli, an Italian diplomat working in Somalia. "In my experience, the majority is not following this extreme approach."

Raffaelli said the Courts group has an incentive to negotiate even with a weak transitional government because doing so would provide the movement with legitimacy.

Some observers, including Ethiopians opposed to war, are convinced that the United States is tacitly giving a green light to Ethiopia to attack. That, they say, would amount to the worst U.S. policy blunder yet in Somalia. Beyene Petros, an opposition leader in Ethiopia's parliament, questioned the wisdom of a visit that Army Gen. John P. Abizaid, head of the U.S. Central Command, paid Meles in Ethiopia last week.

"If there is disapproval, you don't pay visits, right?" he said. "We used to see this call for restraint, but I have not seen that lately."

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