

Kenya wary of being seen as an occupying force in Somalia port

Richard Lough

Reuters

5 Oct 2012

KISMAYU, Somalia (Reuters) - From the rooftop of Kismayu's rundown port, Kenyan troops scoured the waters across to the southern Somali city, part of an operation to flush out rebel remnants after al Qaeda-backed militants fled last week from their last major stronghold.

While Somali government troops and militia fighters allied to Mogadishu patrol Kismayu's sandy streets, Kenya's army is mostly camped out at outlying sites, keen not to alarm a population that traditionally opposes foreign intervention.

"We don't want to be seen as an occupying force," Colonel Cyrus Oguna, a Kenyan army spokesman, told a Reuters reporter travelling with Kenyan forces.

The allied forces attacked Kismayu by sea, land and air last week, storming a wide, windswept bay where on Friday a beached merchant vessel waited to discharge its military cargo.

Al Shabaab fighters fled the city a week ago, leaving behind a small number of militants to carry out suicide bombings, hit-and-run grenade attacks and targeted shootings, Oguna said.

"(Locals) are afraid to show signs of happiness. Their silence tells you very loudly that al Shabaab still lurk in the shadows," Oguna said.

In the towering sand dunes behind, scores of Kenyan troops guarded a dirt airstrip, seeking shade in the thorny scrub and under canvas.

"The best part of the attack was the surprise. We caught them off guard," said the driver of a machine-gun-mounted jeep. The capture of Kismayu was a year in the making following Kenya's military deployment into Somalia to help crush the Islamist militants.

Local residents appeared unfazed as a heavily armed convoy rolled through Kismayu. The port city has in some neighborhoods escaped the battle scarring inflicted across the capital Mogadishu, 500 km to the north, during two decades of fighting.

In some neighborhoods, pastel-colored concrete buildings lined well-kept tarmac streets plied by local minibus taxis.

CONTROL OF PORT A PRIZED TARGET

Kismayu's now-dilapidated seaport is among the war-ravaged country's deepest and most strategic harbors, lying less than 200 km east of neighboring Kenya, the region's biggest economy.

At the peak of its rebellion, al Shabaab is estimated to have earned tens of millions of dollars annually through the port, from taxes on charcoal exports to Gulf states and duty levied on imported contraband, including weapons, sugar and electronic goods.

Its crumbling warehouses are now a base for hundreds of allied troops but its revenue potential means it is a prized target for the city's rival clans.

One of those who will be keen on the top regional political post is Sheikh Ahmed Madobe. Madobe is a former governor of Kismayu and one-time Islamist commander under an administration that was routed from its urban redoubts by Ethiopian forces sent into Somalia between 2006-2009 with tacit U.S. backing.

His Ras Kamboni militia have fought alongside Kenyan troops over the past year, flushing al Shabaab out of their strongholds in the south of the largely lawless Horn of Africa country.

Madobe, however, dismissed talk the job of governor was his and pointed to negotiations he said were underway under the auspices of the regional IGAD block.

"There is some propaganda that the KDF (Kenyan Defence Forces) captured Kismayu so that it could deliver Madobe into the role (of governor) as a Kenyan puppet," Madobe said, clad in his militia's plain green military fatigues.

"That is not the case".

Popular with his footsoldiers for leading from the frontline, Madobe said the makeup of Kismayu's future administration would be decided by Somalis.

"We expect they will make a good decision," he said, his salt and pepper beard dyed orange with henna.

POLITICS "A LITTLE COMPLICATED"

Not all his lieutenants, though, are as guarded. One, a 28-year old intelligence officer with a boyish smile and long crimped hair that fell over his eyes, said relations between Ras Kamboni and government forces were strong. But at the political level, he said, "it might be a little more complicated".

"Madobe fought for a long time. He was the only leader in the frontlines," the intelligence officer said behind wrap-around sunglasses, declining to be named. "If he is not the governor, Kismayu will face more problems. We will be upset."

Washington's top diplomat on Africa, Johnnie Carson, this week said there would be competition among Kismayu's clans for control of the city following the expulsion of al Shabaab.

Any eventual political administration, analysts say, must accommodate Kismayu's clan rivalries. If it does not, al Shabaab may galvanize a new wave of support.

Since the assault on Kismayu last week, the allied forces have had minimal contact with the insurgents, soldiers said.

Kismayu's ruined international airport lies several kilometers south of the city, at the end of tarmac strip that cuts through the outer lying flat, empty sandy terrain.

Al Shabaab's flag is painted on the facade of the gutted bare concrete terminal, a fading symbol of the group's four year grip on Kismayu.

"We've seen them on the radar, they operate in small groups. We trace them moving at night. But they've not engaged us. We haven't heard gunfire or mortars," said a Kenyan soldier who gave his name as Bernard.

Asked how long he expected Kenya's military to remain in Somalia, he said: "We have no deadline."

"The military line of operations has its own limits," Brigadier Anthony Ngere, the commander of Kenya's forces in southern Somalia, told Reuters. "The politics needs to move in tandem."

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