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African Union Force Makes Strides Inside Somalia

by Jeffrey Gettleman



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Above, soldiers from Burundi manned positions in Mogadishu last week. Right, last month near Mogadishu, Shabab militants displayed the bodies of men they said were peacekeepers.

NAIROBI, Kenya — When the first batch of African Union peacekeepers landed at Mogadishu's decrepit airport in 2007, they were immediately shelled by insurgents with mortars and given little chance of success. This was Somalia after all, the graveyard of several other doomed interventions, and the African Union soldiers were a last resort for a deeply troubled mission.



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But four years later and nearly 10,000 soldiers strong, the African Union force in Somalia has hardened into a war-fighting machine — and it seems to be winning the war. Analysts say the African Union has done a better job of pacifying Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital and a hornet’s nest of Islamist militants, clan warlords, factional armies and countless glassy-eyed freelance gunmen, than any other outside force, including 25,000 American troops in the 1990s.

Grinding out victories in a graveyard of doomed interventions.

The peacekeepers have “performed better than anyone would have dreamed,” said J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa program at the Atlantic Council, a Washington research institution.

Their surprising success has put the African Union in the driver’s seat of an intensifying international effort to wipe out Somalia’s Shabab militants, once and for all. Kenya, Ethiopia, the United States, France, Djibouti, Burundi and Uganda have all jumped in to some degree against the Shabab, a brutal and wily insurgent group that is considered both a regional menace and an international threat, with possible sleeper cells embedded in Somali communities in the United States and Europe.

The Shabab have been terrorizing Somalia for years, imposing a harsh and alien form of Islam, chopping off heads and unleashing suicide bombers, including Somali-Americans recruited from Minnesota. But the African Union has dealt the Shabab a crippling blow in Mogadishu, which is what may have encouraged Kenyan and Ethiopian forces to recently invade separate parts of Somalia in an unusual regional effort to spread the Shabab thin on several fronts and methodically eliminate them.

But the Shabab are hardly giving up. Young, messianic insurgents are viciously resisting the African Union troops, sometimes fighting hand to hand, with both sides suffering heavy losses.

African Union officials, who have been reluctant to disclose casualties and in the past even provided apparently false accounting of the numbers, revealed that more than 500 soldiers had been killed in Somalia, making this peacekeeping mission one of the bloodiest of recent times.

Oct. 20 was a particularly bad day. Shortly after dawn, several hundred peacekeepers marched into Deynile, one of the last Shabab strongholds in Mogadishu.

“It started off easy, too easy,” groaned Cpl. Arcade Arakaza, a Burundian peacekeeper, from a hospital bed in Nairobi.

There was little resistance, with a few Shabab fighters fleeing in front of them. Civilians smiled from the bullet-riddled doorways, saying things like, “Don’t worry, Shabab finished.”

But suddenly the entire neighborhood opened up on the peacekeepers with assault rifles, belt-fed machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, “women, kids, everyone,” Corporal Arakaza said. It was a classic envelope trap, with the Shabab drawing the peacekeepers deeper into their lair, sealing off the escape routes and then closing in from all sides.

Dozens of peacekeepers were wounded, including Corporal Arakaza, who was shot through the groin, and more than 70 killed in the span of a few minutes. But the African Union soldiers clawed back, eventually capturing a chunk of Shabab territory.

Unlike the Americans, who hastily left Somalia after 18 soldiers were killed during the infamous Black Hawk Down debacle in 1993, or the United Nations mission that folded not long after-

ward, the African Union has pressed on. It plans to send thousands more young men from deeply impoverished sub-Saharan nations into the maw of Somalia, an arrangement that is lucrative for the governments of the contributing countries and the soldiers themselves — they each can make \$1,000 a month as a peacekeeper compared with as little as \$50 back home.

The American government is helping foot this bill, contributing more than \$400 million. Even so, some American officials say the mission is underfinanced. They insist the African troops need better flak jackets, more armored trucks and helicopters. Many peacekeepers bled to death that day in Deynile because they had no way of being rescued.

“These guys are fighting and dying every day and there’s a national interest for us in Somalia,” one American official said. “It’s crazy we’re spending more money on Congo and Darfur,” home to enormous United Nations peacekeeping missions that in total cost the American government more than \$1 billion per year, though neither place is considered strategically vital to the United States.

Few in Washington are optimistic about getting the African Union better equipment during a painful round of budget cuts at the Pentagon and State Department. While Darfur, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have high-powered champions like Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who visited eastern Congo to spotlight the rape problem, or the countless celebrities who routinely tour Darfur, several American officials who work on Africa say there is not a strong lobby for Somalia in the White House.

The Pentagon has organized occasional Special Operations strikes to take out wanted Somali terrorist suspects — the Shabab have drawn increasingly close to Al Qaeda — and the American government is paying contractors to train African Union troops in the ABCs of urban combat. But the official American policy is no boots on the ground, which goes for the French as well, who have also bombed Shabab camps.

That leaves a dreary infantry war between the ill-equipped African peacekeepers, who come from Burundi and Uganda, with several hundred Djiboutians on their way, and the Shabab.

Sgt. Astere Nimbona, another Burundian peacekeeper, said that his unit had no armored personnel carriers or tanks on the day of the Deynile battle. He marched nine hours straight under the equatorial sun, lugging pounds of bullets and an empty canteen, before he stepped into the ambush.

“What we did was basically suicide,” he said.

The African Union has shifted from blasting Shabab areas with long-range artillery, which it did in the beginning, killing many civilians, to using foot patrols. They have now succeeded in securing most of Mogadishu, without making nearly as many enemies.

The peacekeepers may soon venture into Somalia’s famine-stricken hinterlands, where the Shabab have been blocking aid convoys from reaching starving people. There is also talk of bringing the Kenyan troops, and possibly the Ethiopian troops, under the green-and-white African Union flag.

But there is an uncomfortable bigger question. What will these African Union sacrifices amount to? All peacekeeping experts say the same thing: that peacekeepers are a Band-Aid on a gaping wound, a way to buy time until a political process takes hold and alleviates the causes of the conflict.

In Somalia, the political process seems as bleak as ever. The Transitional Federal Government, Somalia’s internationally recognized authority that the African Union protects, is a collection of corrupt politicians and warlords who control almost no territory and are exceedingly unpopular.

The government has yet to fix schools, open hospitals or deliver services in just about all the neighborhoods the African Union has wrested away from the Shabab in battles that often cost dozens of lives for a few crumbling city blocks.

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African Peacekeepers Surprise Many With Success in Subduing Somalia



Al-Qaeda fighters from Beledweyne moved positions in Mogadishu last week. They are seen here in a field.

IN AFRICA, the United Nations-backed African Union force is making significant gains in Somalia, pushing back against al-Qaeda-linked militants.

The force has captured several key areas, including the port city of Beledweyne, and is now moving towards Mogadishu.

The success of the force is a surprise to many, as it has managed to maintain its momentum despite heavy resistance.

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