

U.S. sends weapons to help Somali government repel rebels tied to Al-Qaeda

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The United States has sent a shipment of weapons and ammunition to the government of Somalia, according to a U.S. official who said the move signals the Obama administration's desire to thwart a takeover of the Horn of Africa nation by Islamist rebels with alleged ties to al-Qaeda.

The shipment arrived in the capital, Mogadishu, this month, according to the official, who is helping craft a new U.S. policy on Somalia and spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

"A decision was made at the highest level to ensure the government does not fall and that everything is done to strengthen government security forces to counter the rebels," the official said.

Still, the situation in the volatile nation continues to deteriorate. Somalia's government issued an urgent plea last weekend for foreign troops as the heaviest fighting in months has engulfed the capital and other regions, killing more than 200 people, including the minister for internal security and the police chief. Fighting since early May has displaced more than 120,000 people, with scores of legislators also fleeing the country, paralyzing parliament.

"We ask for and welcome any troops that can save this country from international terrorists," said Nur Ali Adan, the government's minister of religious affairs, echoing an appeal from the parliament speaker for Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Yemen to send troops.

The government has also tried to rally other foreign support, especially from the United States, which has long worried that Somalia could become a base for al-Qaeda to launch terrorist attacks such as the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

U.S. and Somali officials say that possibly hundreds of fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and other nations are fighting alongside the Islamist rebel group known as al-Shabab, which the United States has designated a terrorist group. U.S. officials have accused Eritrea of sending weapons to the rebels, who have taken over much of Mogadishu and southern Somalia.

Besides sending weapons, the United States recently committed \$10 million to help revive the Somali army and the police, who in the 1970s were one of the best-trained forces on the continent but collapsed when the last central government fell in 1991. The United States has been sharing intelligence with the government, according to the U.S. official, and a group of Somali political leaders from various regions of the country have been invited to Washington to develop a strategy for fighting the rebels.

"U.S. support is very, very firm," said the Somali foreign minister, Mohamed Omaar, speaking by telephone during a recent visit to Washington. "They are very clear that they are in support of this government politically, financially, diplomatically."

The Obama administration's approach is different in many respects from that of the Bush administration, which focused almost exclusively on targeting several suspects in the embassy bombings and other rebel leaders with alleged al-Qaeda ties.

The Bush administration paid a group of notorious Somali warlords to hunt terrorism suspects. But the policy backfired, giving rise to a diverse Islamist movement, including al-Shabab, which gained popularity by defeating the hated warlords. The Bush administration then tried backing an Ethiopian invasion in 2006 to overthrow the Islamists and install a transitional government, a move that triggered the al-Shabab rebellion that continues today. The Bush

administration conducted airstrikes targeting al-Qaeda suspects, but only one of those targeted was ever confirmed killed.

Meanwhile, the rebels continued to advance across southern Somalia and eventually helped force the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops this year.

To cut off the rebels' weapons and supplies, the United States has stepped up pressure on Eritrea, and foreign warships patrolling Somali waters to combat piracy have begun blocking cargo ships heading to the rebel-held port of Kismaayo in southern Somalia.

African diplomats have also proposed a no-fly zone over Somalia to prevent weapons from being flown in from Eritrea to the rebels, but it is unclear whether that idea will gather necessary support at the United Nations.

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