

## Jihadists on the march

*The strongest Islamist militia is now formally linked to al-Qaeda.*

The war in Somalia between the Islamist militias known as the Shabab and the Western-backed supposedly "transitional" government headed by Sharif Ahmed, himself an Islamist who promotes sharia law, is getting even bloodier. The UN says that ferocious fighting in the capital, Mogadishu, has caused at least 8,000 residents to flee this month, to add to the 1.5m Somalis already displaced, out of a population that once exceeded 8m. Government forces, which control a shrinking slice of the capital, are still on the defensive. But independent reports are scanty; it is hard to say exactly what is going on from day to day. Chaos and terror prevail.

For instance, when three Shabab fighters were found dead this week in Mogadishu's Bakara market, each shot in the head, it was unclear who had killed them. Some said government forces. Others blamed Ethiopian spies. Or was it Hizbul Islam, a radical Islamist outfit that has fallen out with the Shabab? Or perhaps the Shabab itself was dealing with turncoats.

President Ahmed sleeps in a presidential palace guarded by African Union (AU) peacekeepers from Uganda and Burundi. There are frequent attempts to kill him. Several of his ministers have been assassinated. The weapons, training and cash given to his unelected administration by the American and European governments are inadequate. Little of the promised \$250m in aid has been disbursed.

Mr Ahmed claims to have 13,000 troops under arms but that is probably an exaggeration. So far they have failed to fend off the smaller Shabab (meaning Youth), which continues to control most of south and central Somalia. A new agreement between the government and al-Sunnah, a moderate Ethiopian-backed militia which espouses a Sufi doctrine, may stall the northward march of the Shabab. But al-Sunnah's price of five cabinet posts as well as seats in Somalia's defunct parliament may weaken what is already a pathetically feeble government.

The Shabab is tightening its grip in the areas it controls, as its opponents dither. It has become more radical, as moderates in its ranks have been eliminated. In January it openly declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda. As a result, more foreign fighters are drifting into the country. Fears are growing that Shabab suicide-bombers may hit neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya. "The soldiers of Allah are now prepared to launch attacks to eliminate the enemy from the country," raged a Shabab leader in Mogadishu earlier this month, to a roar of approval from the crowd. The enemy includes the 4,000-odd AU peacekeepers who are meant to stop the government from being driven into the sea.

As usual, civilians are bearing the brunt of the misery. All sides have killed them with impunity. The International Committee of the Red Cross says its two hospitals in Mogadishu have treated 1,500 war wounded this year. Few children go to school. Infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world. Food is expensive and scarce. Rains have failed again in central Somalia. Cattle and camels are dying or having to be slaughtered. Shabab commanders in the south refuse to work with the UN's World Food Programme to distribute food aid unless the WFP buys some grain from Somali farmers and ensures that none of the food handed out is American. Some UN officials would be willing to oblige. The Americans, in any case, say their shipments of food should stop until it can be guaranteed that none of it reaches the Shabab. As a result, everyone suffers.

**Fonte: The Economist. Disponível em: <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 2 mar. 2010.**