

U.S. GOES AFTER AL-QAIDA SUSPECTS IN SOMALIA

The United States has sent war planes into the East African country of Somalia to kill al-Qaida terrorists suspected of planning the 1998 bombings of United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed more than 225 people.

The al-Qaida members were in the process of fleeing Somalia for the neighboring country of Kenya.

Al-Qaida was reportedly being protected by an Islamic militia group that ruled most of the country. But in recent weeks, that militia was ousted by forces from the U.S.-backed transitional government and troops from the neighboring country of Ethiopia.

U.S. involvement

Somalia's transitional president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, said he gave permission for the U.S. air attacks. The government also has asked for ground troops.

"The only way we are going to kill or capture the surviving al-Qaida terrorists is for U.S. special forces to go in on the ground," Somalia's Deputy Prime Minister Hussein Aideed said, according to the Associated Press.

The last U.S. military involvement in Somalia was in the early '90s when troops were sent to help deliver much-needed food and medicine and stabilize the country after the government was overthrown.

That mission spun out of control in 1993, when U.S. helicopters were attacked by militants. The deaths of 18 U.S. soldiers resulted from the incident, which became known as "Black Hawk Down."

Al-Qaida in Somalia

U.S. officials have been worried that Somalia is a breeding ground for terrorists, in part because of the chaotic environment in the country.

Until December 2006, Somalia's government had no power outside of the town of Baidoa, 150 miles from the capital. The countryside and the capital were run by warlords and militia groups who could be paid to protect terrorist groups.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers kept close tabs on the country and paid a group of Somali warlords to help hunt down members of al-Qaida in 2006, according to the New York Times.

Meanwhile, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the deputy to al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, issued a message this month calling for all Muslims to come to Somalia to help fight U.S. allies.

The struggle for government

In the wake of the U.S. strikes in Somalia, experts are focusing on the importance of strengthening Somalia's government to weaken terrorist groups in the region.

Since 1991, warlords have battled for control of Somalia and there have been 14 different governments.

The country's most recent attempt at a government, known as the transitional government, was formed in 2004 with the help of the United Nations.

The transitional government has never had the popular support of the public and has been unable to exert any real control over the country.

The government has close ties to neighboring Ethiopia, a secular country with a large Christian population, that many in the primarily Muslim nation of Somalia distrust.

"[Ethiopia's] support of the transitional government greatly tarnishes the image that the transitional government has at a popular level," Stephen Morrison, director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told the NewsHour.

Conflict with the Islamic Courts

One movement that was able to find support from the Somali people was the Islamic Courts, a group that sought to impose Islamic law on the country.

"Somalia was an ungoverned space for a very long time. And in this ungoverned space, you had the Islamic Courts providing security, providing charitable assistance," Andre Le Sage of the National Defense University told the NewsHour.

The group seized control of southern Somalia, including the country's capital Mogadishu, in June of 2006, prompting Ethiopia to send in troops to try to protect the transitional government.

In December, the Islamic Courts warned Ethiopia they would declare war if Ethiopia did not remove all troops from Somalia. Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, leader of the Islamic Courts called for a jihad, or holy war, against Ethiopia and encouraged foreign Islamic fighters to come to Somalia.

At that time, the United States accused the group of being controlled by al-Qaida, but the Islamic Courts denied that charge.

War broke out on Dec. 24, and the Islamic Courts were overpowered and quickly defeated by Ethiopia's military.

After the Islamists were driven out, Somalia's President Abdullahi Yusuf was able to enter the country's capital for the first time.

--Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra

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