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Get Ethiopian troops out of Somalia

By Gregory H. Winger

ALEXANDRIA, VA. – In matters of war, America must be wary of an ally who greets her with a beggar's hand. This is the case with Ethiopia and its involvement in the war on terror: The country hopes that if it helps keep radical Islam at bay in the horn of Africa, the US will send aid its way.

In early summer, at the request of the fledgling Somali government, neighboring Ethiopia moved troops into Somalia to halt the advance of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which already controls much of the south, including Mogadishu, Somalia's capital.

Ethiopia's actions seem to be in the best interest of the United States, as a militant Islamic regime in Somalia would be a major complication in the war on terror. However, Ethiopia is neither suited to promoting peace in Somalia nor interested in pacifying the troubled land. In truth, no country stands to gain more than Ethiopia from a war against the Islamic militias in Somalia.

Ethiopian troops in Somalia are regarded as hated foreign interlopers whose sole purpose is to prop up an unpopular and powerless regime. Ethiopian soldiers on Somali soil strengthen the Islamic Courts by allowing them to claim the mantle of nationalist defenders, which garners them popular support and undermines the country's transitional government. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi is not only aware that his actions have increased the possibility of conflict, but is counting on the outbreak of war to win him aid.

The past year has not been kind to the Ethiopian government. After fixed elections that allowed Mr. Zenawi to win a third term, the government began a crackdown on the opposition. In response, the US Congress passed a bill branding the government as undemocratic and an abuser of human rights. Additionally, international donors have stopped the flow of cash to the Ethiopian government, and have not been in contact with the regime for several months. The loss of aid has hurt, as Ethiopia is one of the most aid-dependent countries in the world.

But an anti-Islamist war in Somalia would enable Zenawi to position himself as a key ally in the war on terror. Zenawi reasons that if his country plays an essential role in supporting Somalia's transitional government against the UIC, the United States will provide economic and diplomatic support, despite other objections to Ethiopia's policies. All Zenawi has to do is wait for civil war in Somalia to reignite - an outcome made more likely by his deployment of troops.

Last week, Somalia's president, Abdullah Yusuf, escaped a suicide car bomb meant to take his life. The transitional government and its Ethiopian allies have been quick to link this attack to the UIC and Al Qaeda. However, even following this attack, war is not inevitable, and the US does not have to play the fool in this potential African tragedy. While both the UIC and Ethiopia would benefit from war, three groups critical to peace would lose in this equation: The struggling transitional government, which has no interest in a war that would lead to its own destruction, and the civil war-weary population and Mogadishu business community, without whose support the UIC cannot keep control of southern Somalia.

America can appeal to these factions within Somalia by offering economic incentives - such as lifting sanctions on certain Somali companies - as a reward for cooperation in seeking a peaceful solution. By assisting a regional peacekeeping mission and supporting the current peace talks in Khartoum between the UIC and the transitional government, the US can help prevent Somalia from becoming a new front in the war on terrorism.

Yet moderation will never triumph as long as Ethiopian troops are on Somali soil and remain a rallying cry for Islamic extremists. Since 2002, the US military has operated a task force in Djibouti to provide humanitarian assistance and military instruction to the horn of Africa. One of the key benefactors has been Ethiopia. America must call immediately for Ethiopia to remove all of its forces from Somali territory. And if Zenawi does not comply, the US should suspend all nonhumanitarian operations inside Ethiopia and all future assistance to the government until Ethiopian soldiers leave Somalia.

America is prepared to help governments in need of assistance, but this aid should not go to a leader eager to spark an unnecessary war. Only when Ethiopia proves itself to be a supporter of progress in the horn of Africa, and a true ally of America in its conduct of both its foreign and domestic affairs, should it enjoy the rewards of American friendship. Until then, the US must show Ethiopia and the world that America refuses to define its allies based solely on whom they battle against, and that fighting in the war on terror merely out of self-interest is not a quick way to curry favor.

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