

Analysis

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Deadliest ever bombing highlights Somalia weakness

Last weekend's truck bombing in Mogadishu killed at least 358 people, making it the deadliest in Somalia's history, an attack that analysts say underscores the fragility of the internationally-backed government. With Somalia's security forces disorganized and riddled with corruption, and deepening suspicion between central and regional governments, the Oct 14 blast highlights the al Qaeda-aligned Shabaab's ability to exploit state weakness and prosecute asymmetric war to deadly effect.

Shabaab gains?

Militarily, the situation has been largely static in recent months. Evicted from the capital in 2011, the Shabaab has maintained its control in many rural parts of central and southern Somalia. "There have been no recent strategic gains" on either side, says Roland Marchal, a researcher at Sciences Po in Paris - neither for the Shabaab nor the Somali army, backed by African Union troops and an increasingly active US military.

"On the surface at least, what we see is stagnation," says Matt Bryden, founder of the Nairobi-based Sahar Research thinktank, who points out that the Shabaab has proven resilient, able to replace commanders and fighters killed by US air strikes. The International Crisis Group (ICG), however, said Friday that Shabaab has recently regained control of several areas outside Mogadishu, including Barire, a strategically significant town on a major road 45 km from the capital. "Averting attacks in Mogadishu is ever harder when surrounding districts revert back to Shabaab control," the ICG says.

Weak security

The Shabaab's intelligence network allows it to exploit flaws and weakness in the security apparatus. For example, the recent Shabaab gains around Mogadishu were, the ICG says, permitted by the withdrawal of government forces in a row over unpaid salaries. Attempts to establish new security checkpoints at the city's gateways have also been subverted, as happened last Saturday, when the truck, though packed with explosives, was waved through by officers. "We know from past experience that they've been able to infiltrate security forces, or to put their own people in government uniforms," says Bryden.

Also significant: the bombing last weekend came days after both the country's defense minister and army chief resigned, without explanation. The simultaneous departure weakened President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, a situation used by Shabaab to its advantage. "It is not that the Shabaab is very strong, it is that the others are really weak," Marchal says.

Fractured government

Federalism in Somalia has existed on paper since 2004, but only began to take shape five years ago. There are now five federal regional states, not including Somaliland which claims independence and does not recognize the central government. Relations between Mogadishu and the regions are fraught, as each struggles for a greater share of power and seeks foreign allies.

Security stakes are high because if the embryonic national army is only deployed in and around the capital, and the 22,000 AU troops secure outlying urban centers, then it is left to regional militias to fight the Shabaab in the bulk of the country. Recently, the diplomatic crisis pitting the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia against Qatar "has aggravated such friction," says ICG.

Some federal regional states have taken sides with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to the dismay of Mogadishu, which has sought to remain neutral in a bid to maintain the substantial it receives from both sides. Marchal deplors the "chaos brought by the Gulf crisis, where any federal president, under the pretext of receiving funding, makes ill-judged foreign policy declarations".

What next?

"Unless the government shifts its posture and engages with the federal member states so they become partners in fighting Shabaab, instead of trying to fight both Shabaab and the federal member states, I don't think we're going to see very much progress," says Bryden. ICG says political opponents could seek to take advantage of the latest crisis to bring down the president. It urges him to "work quickly to improve relations with federal states" and resolve quarrels over distribution of resources. Otherwise, analysts warn, the only winner will be the Shabaab. —AFP

Paid 'vacation' for some dissidents

Hu Jia, a well-known Chinese dissident who lives in Beijing, says he had hoped to go to the southeastern city of Xiamen for his government-sponsored holiday, but state security officials said no. "They told me I had to go to a more isolated place this time," he told Reuters by phone from Yunnan province in far southwestern China, a popular destination renowned for its scenery and the culture of its ethnic minority groups.

Rights groups say that Hu is one dozens of activists and dissidents detained, placed under tighter monitoring or "vacationed" by authorities, during the week-long congress of the ruling Communist Party which began on Wednesday in Beijing. President Xi Jinping is expected to tighten his grip on power at the gathering, which is only held once every five years.

For his enforced holiday, Hu and his two government minders jointly decided on the destinations. Hu suggested the ancient town of Dali in Yunnan for the first stop, and the public security agents accompanying him chose the second and third stops in the southwest region, Guiyang - the capital of the mountainous province of Guizhou, and the coastal city of Beihai in Guangxi province.

Hu estimated the whole trip for the three of them will cost close to 10,000 yuan (\$1,510), all paid for by the authorities. He said that his minders tried to save money by choosing basic hotels and travelling between the three cities by bus. He will fly back to Beijing on Oct 28, just after the congress ends. "You can go see the sights, but state security goes with you everywhere," Hu said.

Reuters was unable to independently verify the accounts of Hu and other dissidents interviewed for this

story. China's public security ministry did not respond to a faxed request for comment on the detention of activists, and the use of "vacations." China rarely explains its treatment of dissidents other than to say that those charged are criminals who harmed social stability and that all people in China are treated equally before the law. It is not unusual for Chinese authorities to heighten monitoring and detention of dissidents before important political events, especially people with high profiles who are known to speak out against the party and state.

Truck Driver

In addition to the enforced vacations, some activists have also been detained, placed under supervision at home, or warned about posting critical messages online in the weeks ahead of congress, according to the Hong Kong-based group Chinese Human Rights Defenders. The group also said it had documented 14 cases of detention of activists in recent weeks. In one case, Wu Kemu, a truck driver from Xuancheng city in the central province of Anhui, was called in by the police for a talk on Oct 11 and has not been released since, his wife Fang Liangxiang told Reuters by phone yesterday.

"They will not say when he will be released. They just told me to wait at home for him," she said, adding that she expected the detention was related to critical things Wu had said about the government on the popular instant messaging platform WeChat. No one answered the phone on Saturday at the Xuancheng city detention centre where Fang says Wu is being held. It is unclear if the total number of detentions, arrests or "vacations" this year is greater

than at the time of previous major events or how many of the cases are directly related to the congress.

Some activists say that the authorities prefer enforced vacations rather than detentions as they can make dissidents both inactive and inaccessible to foreign journalists over sensitive periods. Locking people up can attract more attention. Hu, a pro-democracy activist and campaigner for those with HIV/AIDS, was sentenced to three-and-a-half years in jail for subversion in 2008, and said he has been under regular state surveillance since his release. "The first thing I did was go for a run up in the mountains by Dali, because I knew the state security agents could not run with me," he said, adding that the agents were "not the running type". "It felt like being briefly free from prison," he said.

Hu said that state security agents had shown him a list of people who would not be allowed to stay in Beijing over the 19th Party Congress, including Liu Xia, the widow of Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. Liu Xia has been under effective house arrest in Beijing since her husband won the Nobel Prize in 2010. After his death in July, even the sporadic communications she's had with friends have been nearly entirely severed, two of them told Reuters. The public security ministry did not respond to a request for comment on Liu Xia's situation. Some activists make their own travel plans to avoid the authorities. Wu Lihong, an activist from Wuxi city in Jiangsu province who for over a decade has been protesting pollution in Lake Tai in eastern China, told Reuters that Chinese state security had called him last week saying they were coming to take him for a forced vacation. —Reuters

Returning Rohingya may lose land, crops under Myanmar plans

Rohingya Muslims who return to Myanmar after fleeing to Bangladesh are unlikely to be able to reclaim their land, and may find their crops have been harvested and sold by the government, according to officials and plans seen by Reuters. Nearly 600,000 Rohingya have crossed the border since Aug 25, when coordinated Rohingya insurgent attacks on security posts sparked a ferocious counteroffensive by the Myanmar army. The United Nations says killings, arson and rape carried out by troops and ethnic Rakhine Buddhist mobs since late August amount to a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya.

Civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has no control over the military, has pledged that anyone sheltering in Bangladesh who can prove they were Myanmar residents can return. Reuters has interviewed six Myanmar officials involved with repatriation and resettlement plans. While the plans are not yet finalized, their comments reflect the government's thinking on how Suu Kyi's repatriation pledge will be implemented.

Jamil Ahmed, who spoke to Reuters at a refugee camp in Bangladesh, is one of many Rohingya who hope to go back. Describing how he fled his home in northern Rakhine state in late August, Ahmed said one of the few things he grabbed was a stack of papers - land contracts and receipts - that might prove ownership of the fields and crops he was leaving behind. "I didn't carry any ornaments or jewels," said the 35-year-old. "I've only got these documents. In Myanmar, you need to present documents to prove everything."

The stack of papers, browning and torn at the edges, may not be enough, however, to regain the land in Kyauk Pan Du village, where he grew potatoes, chilli plants, almonds and rice. "It depends on them. There is no land ownership for those who don't have citizenship," said Kyaw Lwin, agriculture minister in Rakhine state, when asked in an interview whether refugees

who returned to Myanmar could reclaim land and crops.

Despite his land holdings, Myanmar does not recognize Ahmed as a citizen. Nearly all the more than 1 million Rohingya who lived in Myanmar before the recent exodus are stateless, despite many tracing their families in the country for generations. Officials have made plans to harvest, and possibly sell, thousands of acres of crops left behind by the fleeing Rohingya, according to state government documents reviewed by Reuters.

Myanmar also intends to settle most refugees who return to Rakhine state in new "model villages", rather than on the land they previously occupied, an approach criticized in the past by the United Nations as effectively creating permanent camps. The government has not asked for help from any international agencies, who are calling for any repatriation to be voluntary and to the refugees' place of origin.

'Ownerless' Crops

The exodus of 589,000 Rohingya - and about 30,000 non-Muslims - from the conflict zone in northern Rakhine has left some 71,500 acres of planted rice paddy abandoned and in need of harvesting by January, according to plans drawn up by state officials. Tables in the documents, reviewed by Reuters, divide the land into paddy sown by "national races" - meaning Myanmar citizens - or "Bengalis", a term widely used in Myanmar to refer to the Rohingya, but which they reject as implying they are illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

Kyaw Lwin, the state minister, confirmed the plans, and said there was a total of 45,000 acres of "ownerless Bengali land". Two dozen combine harvesters operated by officials from the agriculture ministry will begin cutting stalks this month in areas under military control. The machines will be able to harvest about 14,400 acres according to official calculations contained in the plans. It is unclear



A Rohingya Muslim woman, Rukaya Begum, who crossed over from Myanmar into Bangladesh, holds her son Mahbubur Rehman and her daughter Rehana Bibi after the government moved them to newly allocated refugee camp areas near Kutupalong in Bangladesh yesterday. — AP

what will become of the remaining crop, but officials told Reuters they would try to harvest all the paddy, recruiting additional labor to harvest manually if necessary.

An acre of paddy in Myanmar typically makes more than \$300 at market, meaning the state will gain millions of dollars worth of rice. The harvested rice will be transported to government stores, where it would either be donated to those displaced by the conflict or sold, Rakhine state secretary Tin Maung Swe told Reuters by phone. "The land was abandoned. There is no one to reap that, so the government ordered to harvest it," he said.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) deputy Asia director Phil Robertson, said the government should at least guarantee that the rice would be used for humanitarian support and not for profit. "You can't call a rice crop 'ownerless' just because you used violence and arson to drive the owners out of the country," he said.

'Model Villages'

Many refugees are fearful to return and are sceptical of Myanmar's guarantees.

Those who do decide to cross back into Myanmar will first be received at one of two centers, according to government plans reviewed by Reuters, before mostly being relocated to model villages. International donors, who have fed and cared for more than 120,000 mostly Rohingya "internally displaced persons" (IDPs) in supposedly temporary camps in Rakhine since violence in 2012, have told Myanmar that they will not support more camps, according to aid workers and diplomats.

"The establishment of new temporary camps or camp-like settlements carries many risks, including that the returnees and IDPs could end up being confined to these camps for a long time," said U.N. spokesman Stanislav Saling in an emailed response. Satellite imagery shows 288 villages, mostly Rohingya settlements, have been fully or partially razed by fires since Aug. 25, according to HRW. Refugees say the army and Buddhist mobs were responsible for most of the arson. The government says Rohingya militants and even residents themselves burned the homes for propaganda. —Reuters