

Leaders meet in U.K. over fragile Somalia's future
By David Stringer (AP), The Washington Times
22 February 2012

LONDON — Somalia's fragile leadership, its neighbors and international allies are meeting in London in the hope of speeding the troubled east African nation's progress toward a stable government and containing the threat from Islamic militants who some fear could export terrorism to Europe and the United States.

About 50 nations and international organizations will attend the one-day summit Thursday, including Somalia's Western-backed transitional government, officials from the northern breakaway republic of Somaliland, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

However many are skeptical the talks can agree on concrete steps to address Somalia's complex problems — pirates who target international shipping, the al-Qaida-linked militant group al-Shabab which holds territory in the country's center and south and the effects of a lengthy famine which Britain's government estimates have killed between 50,000 and 100,000 people.

Others suspect the attention of Clinton and world leaders is currently focused on more urgent troubles, including the crisis in Syria — which will be discussed in meetings on the sidelines of the conference.

Somalia has had transitional administrations for the past seven years, but not had a functioning central government since 1991, when warlords overthrew a longtime dictator and turned on each other, plunging the nation into two decades of chaos. The weak U.N.-backed administration — which holds the capital, Mogadishu, with the support of about 12,000 African Union soldiers — has been boosted by recent offensives against al-Shabab and U.N. approval Wednesday for an increase in the size of the peacekeeping mission.

"We are moving from an era of warlordism, terrorism, extremism and piracy and we are moving into an era of peace, stability and normalcy," Somali prime minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali told BBC radio. "Twenty years of lawlessness, violence and chaos is enough. Somalis are ready to move on."

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the London conference would try to bolster tentative signs of progress, including a recent fall in the number of pirate attacks off Somalia's coast.

The European Union's naval anti-piracy patrol said pirates hijacked six vessels between May and December 2011, compared to 19 between January and April. Ransoms last year cost the shipping industry about \$135 million.

"It means working with all the parts of Somalia — which has been more blighted by famine, by disease, by violence, by terrorism than almost any other in the world — to give that country a second chance," Cameron told lawmakers Wednesday.

In New York, the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously to authorize an increase in the African Union peacekeeping force — known as AMISOM — from 12,000 to about 17,700 and expand its areas of operation in an effort to intensify pressure on militants.

Al-Shabab — which earlier this month formalized its relationship with al-Qaida — is currently being hit from three sides in Somalia, pressed out of Mogadishu by AMISOM soldiers, while Kenyan forces who moved into Somalia in October pressure the militants from the south and Ethiopian forces sweep in from the west.

The leaders of Kenya and Ethiopia, who sent in troops amid concerns that Somalia's instability would spread over their borders, are attending the London talks.

Western intelligence agencies worry that al-Shabab militants, including foreign fighters trained in Somali camps, could attempt to mount attacks in Europe and the U.S. In Britain, which hosts the 2012 Olympics in July, spy agencies are recruiting Somali language specialists.

“The security threat is real, it is substantial. It is based on the fact that al-Shabab is an organization that has now explicitly linked itself to al-Qaida, and it encourages violent jihad not just in Somalia but also outside Somalia,” Cameron told the BBC Somali service television.

Officials estimate about 40 people have traveled from the U.S. to Somalia to join al-Shabab since 2007, and that around 50 Britons are currently fighting there. Security officials believe Somali training camps are now being used by foreign extremists with no ties to the country, many of whom have been squeezed out of Pakistan’s borderlands.

In a message posted to a recognized Twitter feed, Al-Shabab accused Cameron of “meddling in Islam affairs in the hope of reviving a hopeless dream of a British Empire” by holding the talks.

Eritrea, which is accused by Somalia and the U.N. of providing support to al-Shabab, has been refused an invitation.

Leaders of the northern breakaway republic of Somaliland will take a role — but won’t win the international recognition they crave, Cameron said. Critics of Western efforts have suggested that local administrations in Somaliland and neighboring Puntland offer a better model for the entire country than attempts to create a central authority.

Explaining Somali’s progress against piracy, Capt. Phil Haslam, a naval officer with the EU anti-piracy patrol, said pirates currently hold seven vessels and 191 hostages, compared to 32 ships and 661 hostages in January 2011.

But Haslam, based at the EU’s anti-piracy headquarters in London, warned that the EU and other international missions are covering about 3.2 million square miles with around 25 boats. “It’s akin to policing Europe with 25 police cars,” he said.

Clinton and Britain’s Foreign Secretary William Hague will travel from the London talks to a conference on Syria’s future being held Friday in Tunis.

(Jason Straziuso in Nairobi, Kenya, and Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed to this report.)