

Al Qaeda hunt in Africa

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Somali officials, who added that "many" people had died in the attacks. Abdirahman Dinari, spokesman for Somalia's interim government said: "Most of them were Islamists." Unconfirmed reports from Somalia say civilians were among those killed, including a 4-year-old boy.

At press time, a key question is whether the US, in its first overt military operation in Somalia since the infamous "Black Hawk Down" intervention in 1992 and '93, has managed to hit the prime targets - Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, or Abu Taha al-Sudani.

The three men are believed to be behind the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, when more than 250 people were killed by two coordinated truck blasts.

Mr. Sudan is listed on Washington terror watch lists as Al Qaeda's point man in East Africa. Mr. Mohammed, from the Comoros archipelago in the Indian Ocean, is suspected of orchestrating a 2002 suicide attack on an Israeli-owned Kenyan hotel.

The failed attempt to shoot down a tourist airliner as it took off from Mombasa airport on Kenya's coast in 2002, heading for Tel Aviv, also bears Mohammed's signature, intelligence sources have said.

"If the attacks have managed to kill or capture some of the top East Africa people in Al Qaeda then it vindicates the actions of the U.S. and Ethiopia, and it shows the ICU has been deceiving everyone," says Matt Bryden, senior analyst with the International Crisis Group in Nairobi.

"But if they haven't, then it compounds what has in the past been a strategy of errors, and makes the U.S. look like it's been sold a lemon by [Somalia's] transitional federal government."

The European Union issued a statement criticizing the attack. Ethiopia, which has begun unprecedented military coordination with U.S. troops in recent months, has issued no statement about the U.S. attacks, but Ethiopian officials say the U.S. and Ethiopia have different agendas in Somalia.

"The Ethiopian mission was not to fight terrorism or Al Qaeda per se, it was to defend the territory of Ethiopia from the penetration of groups based in Somalia," says Mohammad Dirir, minister for tourism in the Ethiopian government. "We targeted the Islamic Courts, and the Americans have their agenda, the war on terrorism."

"In Somalia, because of the failed state, it became a safe haven for all sorts of terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda," says Dirir. "The lieutenant of Osama bin Laden, Mr. Ayman Zawahiri, made statements calling on Muslims to come fight in Somalia. There are some Arab countries who are not allowing terror activities on their own territory, but don't mind if it is exported to the Horn of Africa."

A European diplomat based in Nairobi, and who watches Somalia closely, says that "there is no doubt that people linked to Al Qaeda - not the high command - but sympathizers, were in Somalia, running training camps, recruiting fighters, arming those fighters."

Some of those fighters were recent arrivals from the wide Somali diaspora, it appears.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said in an interview with the French daily Le Monde published Monday that "Many international terrorists are dead in Somalia." He said passports from different countries have been collected. "The Kenyans are holding Eritrean and Canadian passport holders. We have injured people coming from Yemen, Pakistan,

Sudan, the United Kingdom."

There was no immediate verification of Meles's claims, but if they are true, he and Washington have the vindication they need to justify their attacks inside Somalia, the European diplomat says.

"That was the crux of it all, that Somalia under the [Union of Islamic] Courts would bring in bad guys from all over the world and train them up into a mercenary force fighting for Islam," he says.

The U.S. airstrikes were likely launched from the former French base, Camp Lemonier, in Djibouti. Starting with about 1,800 troops in 2002, Djibouti has become the main regional base of the U.S. military's counterterrorism task force. It also serves as a major desert warfare training center, an intelligence gathering center, and logistics base for U.S. military forces. Its position right next to Somalia puts American forces within easy striking distance.

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US AC-130 aircraft attacked the villages of Hayi and Brando Monday where three Al Qaeda leaders are suspected to be hiding. No confirmed reports yet on casualties.

US helicopter gunships attacked village of Hayi Tuesday.

The aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower and three other US ships are now patrolling off the Somali coast to prevent Al Qaeda suspects from escaping.

SOURCES: BBC, AP RICH CLABAUGH - STAFF

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