

# Kenya: no longer impervious

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The Kivi Milimani Hotel is one of modest hotels in uptown Nairobi. It used to be packed with tourists from Europe and Asia. However, in the past few weeks the hotel is deserted because of cancellations. David Joseph, general manager, attributes this to the sense of insecurity on the part of tourists and tourist operators because of the ongoing Kenyan military operation in Somalia a.k.a. Operation Linda Nchi in Kiswahili [roughly translated as protect the country]. Kenya's economy already battered by the depreciating shilling and rising inflation is immensely affected. Primarily, the tourism industry, which is second biggest source of foreign earnings, has begun feeling the impact. It has now been three weeks and Kenyan defence forces are still inside Somalia in hot pursuit of the terrorist group; Al-Shabaab.

## **It takes two to tango**

Kenya invoked section 51 of the United Nations Convention and entered Somalia on October 16, 2011 after the Al-Qaeda affiliated group were involved in spates of hijackings and kidnappings of tourists and threatened its security. Self-defence justifies Kenya's crossing the border into Somalia. According to Charles Onyango-Obbo, the Ugandan born editor at Nation Media Group, with Somalia's war Kenya finally becomes a true Great Lakes Nations. Until the Somalia actions, Kenya was the only country in the wider Great Lakes region that had never invaded or been invaded by another country. The Kenyan example suggests that you can't live in peace with your neighbour by mere wish. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. With its Somalia campaign, Kenya has become a true East African or Great Lake nation and it is no more war impervious.

With the Kenyan army pushing deep into Somalia many are questioning the motive. There are many questions before answers about the operation. Save the scope, operation capability of the army and its final exit strategy are a case in point. Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni, was quoted by the whistleblower WikiLeaks as saying the Kenyan army is not war tested. To use his phrase he said it is a career army with little or no background of fighting in the past. Professional than being operational and idle with little UN peace keeping

experience. However Major (Rtd.) Imaana Laibuta, Security Consultant, argues that Kenya with its aviation wing and light and heavy armour is capable of wiping out enemy including Al-Shabaab. Further, “its army commanders are also the best tacticians in the military.” he says.

Notwithstanding the Kenyan government’s statements about its offensive capability in Somalia, there are some regional security analysts who dare say that Kenya is unprepared and its military action is instinctual. Domestic and international pressures after the twin kidnappings on foreign tourists are the main reason behind this uncalled for action. David H. Shin, former US Ambassador to Ethiopia and Adjunct Professor of International Relations at Georgia University, told Focus on Africa that France has pressed Kenya to hunt down the criminal group after its national, Maria Dedieu, was taken hostage from her beach resort island in Lamu. But Major Imaana Laibuta refutes this idea. He says “Fighting Al-Shabaab can’t be a knee jerk reaction, rather a deliberate and planned campaign. Likewise, Kenyan Government Spokesman, Dr. Alfred Mutual, told Kenyan media recently that the military incursion had been in the pipeline for a while.

As to the scope of the military offensive, the pre-emptive actions aim at flushing out the deadly group and minimize its capability. Major Emmanuel Chirchir, Kenyan Military spokesperson said, “We are ready to go to all lengths to make sure Al-Shabaab is ineffective.” According to Kenyan plan that has been made public, the final move to Kismayu would enable Kenya to create a buffer zone under the local administration of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) between its territory and Al-Shabaab.

## **Diplomacy**

The Kenyan army with its unparalleled swift move have over taken a number of towns that were controlled by Al-Shabaab without much resistance. Among others the capture of Ras Kamboni is the biggest trophy to Kenyan troops as it is a serious blow to Al Shabaab. Ras Kamboni has been a safe haven not just for pirates but also training camps for Al-Qaeda linked terrorist groups

In the diplomatic front, the Kenyan move in hot pursuit of the terrorist group to instil security has received outright backing. Members of Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC) across the board have endorsed Kenyan’s move. Especially the IGAD Council of Minister in its extraordinary

meeting held on October 21, 2011, in Addis Ababa adopted a communiqué expressing support for Kenya. It welcomed Kenya's security operation in pursuit of Al-Shabaab. Addressing the session, Hailemariam Desalegn, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, expressed the belief that Kenya's recent military action was within the limits of the right to self defence as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the responsibility to protect the safety and security of its people.

Even though the Kenya government enjoys international support, a statement by TFG president, Sheikh Sharif, calling for a halt on Kenyan military move, have taken many by surprise and created confusion. The US and Europe expressed dismay over comments that called Kenya to stop its advances against Al-Shabaab. The remarks contrary to the leaders of TFG's Transitional Federal Institutions calls into question Sharif's commitment to flushing out the Al-Qaeda affiliated group. Many are increasingly seeing him as sympathetic to the militant group. The paradox is that Al-Shabaab is the very group that fights tooth and nail to overthrow him. Many analysts associated this either to his encirclement by hard core elements or as a window dressing for public relations to garner nationalistic support. Some argue that the establishment of an "Azania" state in Jubaland undermines and weakens his power in favour of Professor Ahmed Gandhi, former TFG defence minister.

In a diplomatic twist, after a few days, the TFG has back tracked and decided to rally behind Kenya's military campaign. An entourage of Somalia officials led by Abdweli Mohamed Ali, the TFG's Prime Minister, in a joint-statement agreed to fight Al-Shabaab as its common enemy. "This threat must be fought jointly by the two nations, with support from international community." The Kenyan intervention has resulted in a diplomatic row with Eritrea. The Eritrean government is accused of sending three planes loaded arms to Baidoa, an Al-shabaab stronghold. The Kenyan Foreign Affairs Minister, Moses Wetangula, summoned Eritrean Ambassador to Kenya, Beyene Russom, opting for diplomatic dialogue before taking other measures. Diplomatic sources in Nairobi believe that Kenya has got tangible intelligence evidence as to Eritrea's unlawful act despite Asmara's vehement denial. Bizarre enough Eritrea unsuccessfully wants to shift the blame game on Ethiopia. The rogue regime of Isaias Afewerki's associating Ethiopia with the current conflict doesn't hold water. By extension Eritrea is at war with Kenya by directly supporting the terrorist group. This is again evidence that the international community should tighten the noose on Eritrea by imposing further sanctions.

## **Exit strategy**

It is an open guess by Kenyans as to the time of a pushback by the Kenyan troops. Fielding questions from local and international media present at the press conference, Kenyan prime minister, Raila Odinga, could not suggest the exact note of withdrawal. "I can't tell how long it will take. This is a war. It is not like 100 meter or 10 meters race. We will fight until the enemy is defeated."

Kenya and Somali need a common strategy to fight Al-Shabaab, what they have agreed on paper so far is that the operation would be led by TFG commanders with Kenyan troop's assistance. Librated areas will also be handed over to local administrations which are expected to be all inclusive, comprehensive based on a 4.5 formula.

After Kenya's intervention in Somalia, Al-Shabaab's spokesperson Sheikh Ali Mohammed Raghe alias Sheikh Ali Dhire warned that the group will turn cities in to blood bath and skyscrapers to the ground. Following this warning there is apprehension in the capital and many other cities. Security is so tight. Finding metal detectors in every hotel restaurant, guesthouse, and supermarket is widely common Kenyans have become suspicious of their shadows. It is not without reason. There were two grenade attacks of which one was linked to a local Al-Shabaab recruit.

After the twin grenade attacks suspicion rules the air in Nairobi. This is mainly because suspected slippery cells of Al-Shabaab are in great number. Quite many pirates are engaged in real estate investment. According to a UN estimate, the group collects up to 100 million dollar as annual income. A report commissioned by the Kenyan government indicates that millions of dollars of piracy money was being funnelled into the country through real states and other conduits.

The Kenyan government have tightened security and the general public is on high alert. Hotels such as Kivil Milimani avails their customers who visit them when the threat level subsides. But Al-Shabaab constitutes a threat not only to Kenya. It is a number one common enemy to the region and the world at large. It is therefore in the interest the international community to hunt dawn the terrorist group and its backers.