

Somali warlords hold 'secret anti-terrorism' talks with US agents: witnesses

Agence France Presse

February 28, 2006

MOGADISHU

A group of powerful warlords controlling the Somali capital on Tuesday held secret talks with US agents in a provincial town in a bid to fight terrorism in the Horn of Africa nation, witnesses said.

The talks between the warlords, who recently formed the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), and the US agents were held in Jowhar, 90 kilometres (55 miles) north of the capital Mogadishu.

"The meeting was convened to discuss the future of peace in Somalia and the best ways of kicking out foreign extremists and their hosts from Somalia," an ARPCT member, who insisted on anonymity, told AFP.

They said the delegates arrived in Jowhar, the seat of Somali transitional government, in two planes -- one carrying the warlords and the other carrying the US agents.

They said all the warlords: Musa Sudi Yalahow, Omar Mohamoud Finish and Botan Issa and Bashir Raghe Shirar were present in the talks, but Mohamed Afrah Qanyare was absent with permission.

"Qanyare's absence was not a sign of disunity in the alliance and he was informed of what was discussed," said the ARPCT member.

Last week, at least 33 people were killed in southern Mogadishu when warlord-backed militia clashed with gunmen from the Alliance of Islamic Courts. Officials said the clashes, which ended with no clear winner, were aimed at ridding the capital of Islamic fundamentalism.

Western intelligence groups have long warned that the world's failure to support efforts to stabilise lawless Somalia risked turning the country into a breeding ground for Islamic extremism.

Last year, the International Crisis Group (ICG) policy group repeated the warning but said that although some militant Islamic groups, including those with alleged ties to Al-Qaeda, were using Somalia as a base, there was little sign they had more than cursory backing from locals.

The rise in Islamic extremism has been held in check by Somalis' general dislike and distrust of radical Muslim clerics and their courts, and the restrictions imposed by fundamentalist militias, the group said.

The warlords formed the ARPCT -- which is believed to be backed by Washington -- last week to play a key role in fighting terrorism in the violence-stricken Horn of Africa nation, which has been without a

functional government since dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was toppled in 1991.

A transitional government formed in October 2004 has failed to exert control across the country, home to 10 million people.