

Eritrea sending missiles, arms to Somalia, UN says

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By Evelyn Leopold

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Reuters) - Huge quantities of arms are reaching Islamic insurgents in Somalia such as surface-to-air missiles from Eritrea, according to a U.N. monitoring group on consistent violations of an arms embargo.

Their recent report to the U.N. Security Council, published by the United Nations, says Somalia is awash with more arms than at any time since the early 1990s when dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown and the northeast African country was thrown into anarchy.

Most weapons have been brought into Somalia via clandestine routes and many have reached the Shabab, the fighting wing of the militant Islamic Courts Union.

"Huge quantities of arms have been provided to the Shabab by and through Eritrea," the report said, adding the Islamists had "an unknown number of surface-to-air missiles, suicide belts and explosive with timers and detonators."

Eritrea has denied sending the weapons, particularly the surface-to-air missiles. But the report showed pictures from a video of the fighters carrying SA-18 missiles, which were used against a Belarus aircraft that had made an emergency landing in Mogadishu, the capital.

The monitoring group in April also showed a Security Council sanctions committee, headed by South African Ambassador Dumisani Kumalo, a video of the actual firing of the missile, which it said was part of a consignment of six SA-18s that had been delivered by Eritrea.

Eritrea is the archrival of Ethiopia, and diplomats say the two have been waging a proxy war in Somalia since last year when Asmara backed a hard-line Islamist movement against the country's fragile government. Ethiopia sent in troops to support the government and dislodge the Islamists from Mogadishu.

NUMEROUS FLIGHTS

The monitoring group said a chartered Boeing 707 cargo plane, owned by Aerogem Aviation Ltd, based in Ghana, had made at least 13 trips from Asmara to Mogadishu, sometimes filing false flight plans. But the flights were confirmed by the International Civil Aviation Organization, the report said.

A letter in the report by Eritrea's U.N. ambassador, Araya Desta, said the accusations were "fabricated" and part of a "subtle disinformation campaign" to cover up Ethiopian "adventurism."

Ethiopia is also not exempt from the arms embargo, even though the United Nations and the African Union support the government. Only Uganda is exempt because its military operates under an AU flag.

Ethiopia, in its letter, said its weapons were legal because it "has been involved in Somalia at the invitation of the legitimate and internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government."

The United States, which believes the Islamists have close ties to al-Qaeda, conducted two air strikes in January. The monitoring group said it received information that on June 2, the U.S. Navy fired several times at suspected Al-Qaeda operatives near the coastal village of Bargal.

Asked about arms embargo violations, Zalmay Khalizad, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said in a letter that attacks against Al Qaeda were in self-defense in response to ongoing threats to the United States.

He said that the U.S. action against "known terrorist targets" did not constitute delivery of weapons to Somalia.

Despite defeats by the Ethiopians, Shabab, which attacks Ethiopian and government troops regularly, has hidden weapons caches for future use and has scattered their fighters, the report said.

Other weapons have found their way through arms dealers operating in a large arms market in Mogadishu, which sells to warlords scattered in central and southern Somalia and "is doing a brisk and lucrative business in arms sales."