

Islamists and exiled Somali MPs reject peace talks

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(Adds Islamist quotes, edits)

By Jack Kimball

ASMARA, July 26 (Reuters) - Somali Islamists and opposition politicians exiled in Eritrea dismissed calls on Thursday to join a peace meeting in Mogadishu that is also being opened to insurgents who have attacked the conference venue.

Organisers appeared to be heeding donor calls for inclusiveness when they announced the move on Wednesday.

They had previously said the twice-postponed meeting would not discuss sharing political posts and that Islamist leaders were welcome only as representatives of their clans.

"The reconciliation committee doesn't have any credibility nor any clear agenda for peace," Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, the leader of an ousted Somali Islamist movement that ruled the south of the country for six months last year, told Reuters in Asmara.

"This invitation is not official ... it was an attempt to convey a message to the international community that the committee was trying to be more inclusive."

Sharif is a key figure among a number of Somali Islamists and opposition figures now living in the Eritrean capital.

Earlier this month, they said they would hold a rival reconciliation meeting in September to discuss how to "liberate Somalia" from what they say is occupation by the government's Ethiopian military allies.

The government dismisses that, saying that it as a sovereign nation invited Ethiopia to assist.

DONOR PRESSURE

President Abdullahi Yusuf's administration set up the Mogadishu conference under heavy international pressure, in what diplomats say is its last best hope of gaining legitimacy and trying to secure peace amid a persistent insurgency.

Mortars have been fired at the meeting, which has grouped hundreds of clan elders, ex-warlords and politicians at a heavily guarded former police base in the north of the city.

Eritrea is the arch-rival of Ethiopia, and diplomats say the two have been waging a proxy war in Somalia since at least last year when Asmara backed a hardline Islamist movement against Yusuf's administration, which is supported by Addis Ababa.

In Mogadishu on Thursday, the Somali government opened an immigration office in its latest bid to win public support.

The administration wants to revive government services that collapsed 16 years ago when dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown and the Horn of Africa nation descended into anarchy.

As a result the old Somali passport became one of the world's most misused travel documents, and is cheaply available on the black market in most east African countries. In November, the government launched a new version boasting a computer chip.

"The old Somali passport has become a tool used by international terrorists," Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi said as he opened the office near Mogadishu's international airport.