

## All Eyes on Eritrea as Arms Shipment Reaches Al-Shabab

( East Africa )



Al-Shabab fighters display weapons as they conduct military exercises in northern Mogadishu, Somalia. (File Photo)

The Kenyan military said two planes landed at an al-Shabab controlled airfield in Somalia this week, loaded with arms destined for the al-Qaida-linked group. The news immediately heightened longstanding suspicions that Eritrea is arming Somali militants.

The Kenyan military did not say from where the airplanes came, but that they landed in the south-central town of Baidoa, an al-Shabab stronghold, and that they were carrying weapons for the militant group.

Local media reports were quick to pin the shipment on Eritrea, which has long been accused of supplying al-Shabab.

The Eritrean Foreign Ministry issued a statement Wednesday denying the accusations, calling them “pure fabrications and outright lies.” It also accused its regional rival Ethiopia of being the chief author of a disinformation campaign aimed at discrediting Eritrea.

But, Rashid Abdi, an analyst with the International Crisis Group says Eritrea has a history of supplying militants in Somalia.

“I think no one doubts that Eritrea has throughout the last four years been supportive of al-Shabab, sending in weapons, sending in trainers and also training hundreds of al-Shabab fighters in some of its military camps,” said Abdi. “But, as I said, it is very difficult to confirm this news story that this support has been resumed by Eritrea.”

A United Nations report released in July alleged Eritrea had flown weapons and fighters into Somalia on numerous occasions.

The report also said Eritrea has been funneling about \$80,000 per month to people linked to al-Shabab through the Eritrean embassy in Nairobi. Eritrea has consistently denied the accusations.

Why fund al-Shabab? Rashid Abdi says it is all about Ethiopia:

“Eritrea definitely has been supportive of al-Shabab for a long time and this support is not ideological, it is essentially meant to counter Ethiopia's influence in Somalia and during the Ethiopian occupation, that was the height of Eritrea's involvement in Somalia,” he said.

Eritrea and Ethiopia fought an intense border war between 1998 and 2000 and tensions have remained high ever since. Analysts say this prompted Eritrea's alleged support of al-Shabab during Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2006.

Now Kenyan troops are pursuing al-Shabab in Somalia, in a cross-border operation that began nearly three weeks ago.

Kenya blames the militants for a spate of recent kidnappings and attacks and has vowed to continue fighting until the threat is eliminated and Kenyans can feel secure.

This week, a spokesperson for the Kenyan army warned of impending military strikes on al-Shabab targets across Somalia, including Baidoa, Afmadow and the port town of Kismayo.

## **East Africa**