

Cleansing 'fundamentalism' from the horn of Africa

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THE BOGEY of "Islamic fundamentalism" has been cleverly contrived by the United States, Europe and NATO. Capitulating on this stance, Ethiopia has considered it appropriate to settle some old scores with Somalia. Towards that end, it has entered into a number of agreements with the US and Israel, ostensibly to combat fundamentalist terrorism. In actual fact, its prime target is Islam and to combat this "menace", it has sought to obtain Western military and financial aid.

It would be recalled that in July 1996, the US had agreed to supply Ethiopia 50 fighter aircraft and a number of helicopter gunships. Having struck this deal, US military sources had started projecting Prime Minister Meles Zinawi, as a trusted friend of America. They looked upon the Ethiopian leader as the only one in the region whom they could thoroughly trust to counter fundamentalism whose roots to them, lay in Sudan and Iran.

According to a report carried by 'Impact International', March 1997, soon afterwards, on August 10, the Ethiopian army launched an attack on three cities in the Gedo region in southwestern Somalia. In the attack, the US-supplied arms, including tanks,

helicopter gunships and armoured vehicles were used. The Ethiopian operation across the border was ostensibly carried out to stamp out "terrorist attacks" from Somalia. In this dastardly act, hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands of people were rendered homeless. Their property, livestock and essential services were also completely destroyed. Regrettably, before withdrawing from Somalia, they set ablaze agricultural fields and crops.

IT IS pertinent to mention here that way back in 1991 and 1992, General Aydeed's USC and General Abshar's Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SDF), had actively neutralised Al-Itihad Al-Islamia (Islamic Union). As such, the upsurge of Islamic fervour had considerably cooled down. However, Ethiopia continued blaming the Islamic Union for the unrest and attack on targets in occupied western Somalia — what is now Ogaden, in eastern Ethiopia. Recently, it has carried out an invasion on Somalia. Ethiopia makes the world believe that it has no territorial ambitions in Somalia and that it had carried out the invasion only to destroy terrorist bases, yet Somalia looks at this attack from a different perspective. Somalia believes that the Is-

lamic Union was in no position to pose any threat to Ethiopia, as it existed in name only. As such, it becomes

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abundantly clear that the Ethiopians had thought it appropriate to take advantage of the Somali crisis.

It is significant to mention here that the commander of the Ethiopian forces, based in

Judi province in "Western Somalia", invited leaders of the Somali faction known as USC/PM to a meeting in the border town of Faifair in early September 1996. In the meeting, the Ethiopian Commander warned them in unequivocal terms that Ethiopia would not hesitate to invade the region again as and when it felt threatened by the Islamic Union.

At a meeting of the representatives of Somali factions which the Ethiopian government called in Addis Ababa, they reiterated the warning that if no measures were taken against the "terrorist" bases of the Islamic Union, Ethiopia would be forced to act. Only two of the faction leaders supported the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia; General Omar Hajj Musali, president of the SNF who felt the Islamic Union had reduced his influence in occupied-western Somalia and presidents of the breakaway Republic of Somaliland.

MUHAMMAD Ibrahim Egat not only endorsed the Ethiopian invasion but was also willing to extend logistic support to strike at the 'Islamic Union bases' in Somalia. He pointed out that the Union had military camps in Burna city in Awadal province and Las Anud in Sool. This claim, was, however, rejected by local

leaders there. Eastern Ethiopia, the Ogaden region, came within an ace of being freed from Ethiopian rule when Somalia fought against Ethiopian forces in 1964 and late 1970s. Since then, the issue of independence of the Somali territory has become a hot political issue. The national debacle of Somalia since 1991 has strengthened Ethiopian stand vis-a-vis its neighbour and its group over the historic Somali territory. The overthrow of the Mengistu regime gave ethnic Ethiopians the right of secession, which only the Eriterians could exercise.

The 'Impact' report concludes that the reconciliation conferences have been held in Kenya and Ethiopia (two neighbouring Christian ruled states which have annexed Somali territories) and the mediatory initiative has been entrusted to Ethiopia, should sound alarm bells ringing not merely in Somalia but in the regional Arab countries too. These are the states which have also close ties with the US and its strategic ally, Israel. Developing ties between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Israel have also implications for the Red Sea, shipping lanes, evoking fear that Ethiopia was parading itself as the overlord in the horn of Africa.

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