

Somalia slides towards war

REUTERS, Nairobi

Neglected by the world for years, Somalia appears on the verge of a war that could escalate into a major regional conflict and play into the hands of hardline Islamists.

Six weeks after taking Mogadishu and other southern towns, the Islamists are engaged in an increasingly bellicose standoff with a fragile, Ethiopian-backed interim government based in the provincial town of Baidoa.

With Islamist militia moving their closest yet to Baidoa this week, and witnesses saying Ethiopian soldiers have poured over the border to defend the government, the prospect of yet another major conflict in Somalia has risen sharply.

"The risk of full-scale war increases by the day," said John Prendergast, of the International Crisis Group, citing the government's "foolish" boycott of peace talks in Sudan and what he called provocative Islamist militia movements.

While Ethiopia is apparently

spoiling for a fight, warning it will crush the Islamists if they attack Baidoa, another regional player -- Eritrea -- is playing a lesser-known but also influential role on the other side, analysts and diplomats say.

Already criticised by the United Nations for funnelling arms to the Islamists during their rise to power in Mogadishu earlier this year, the Eritreans are continuing to supply weapons, funds and personnel, the experts believe.

"The Eritrean support is the backbone of the Islamists' military structure," said one analyst, who has close contacts with all sides in the Somali crisis but asked not to be named. "In Mogadishu, the Eritrean presence is everywhere. Believe me, I've seen them."

Ethiopia's motives are obvious: It wishes to remain the dominant power in the Horn of Africa; it has traditionally sought to influence Somalia and contain radical Islam there; and it fears Islamist aspirations in its Ogaden ethnic Somali region.

Eritrea's thinking is less clear -- beyond hatred of Ethiopia.

Asmara became independent in 1991 after a 30-year uprising and later fought a border conflict with Ethiopia.

"It is purely to obstruct Ethiopia that the Eritreans are getting involved in Somalia, they don't have big past links or interests," said an African diplomat who tracks the Horn.

Both Addis Ababa and Asmara deny any presence in Somalia, but their statements are taken with a pinch of salt by many.

SOMALIS SUFFERING
If war starts, the world will be badly placed to stop it.

Washington and other Western powers are already militarily stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, and distracted by the crisis in Lebanon. Foreign intervention could anyway inflame the Somali conflict by heightening popular support for the Islamists and attracting foreign radicals.

The Islamists are led by a man on US and UN terrorism lists, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, and are widely believed to be harbouring a small number of both foreign and local radicals.

A big, polarising conflict could turn Somalia into just the haven for extremists that the United States and others fear.

If the Islamists win and hardliners stay at the top, "Somalia may be a very attractive place for radicals, especially two or three years down the line when Iraq settles down and people are looking for somewhere else to go," the analyst said.

The involvement of Ethiopia in

any conflict would also hand the Islamists a strong card with Somalis, many of whom regard their neighbours as the traditional enemy.

"An armed confrontation between the Islamic Courts Council and Ethiopia would be likely to generate a wave of ultra-nationalism in Somalia that would redound to the advantage of the Courts and might ignite a regional war," said Michael Weinstein of the US-based Power and Interest think-tank.

A flurry of diplomatic initiatives since the Islamist takeover has focused on trying to get them to start a dialogue with the interim government. But a promising first meeting in Sudan stalled after a government boycott of a second round.

And with the United States struggling to reshape its policy toward Somalia after misjudged backing for defeated warlords, the international response has been slow and fragmented.

"External players' failure to devise coherent strategies and their weak calls for dialogue have allowed the Islamic Courts Council to advance unhindered, contributed to the breakdown of the Transitional Federal Government and raised the probability of an armed confrontation," Weinstein added.

Since a disastrous US-led intervention in the early 1990s, Somalia was low on the radar for the world's powers -- until the Islamist takeover set alarm bells ringing in Washington.

Heatwave in Europe, US, but is it climate change?

REUTERS, Rome

As large parts of Europe and North America once again bake in an exceptionally hot summer, many people are asking what has now become a perennial question: "Is this global warming?"

The heat has already killed at least 21 people in France, including a 15-month-old baby, prompting fears of a repeat of the European heat wave in 2003 in which at least 15,000 people in France and 20,000 in Italy died.

Large parts of the United States and Canada have also seen record high temperatures this month. "We are cooking," said US meteorologist Dennis Feltgen of the National Weather Service.

Many scientists reckon the globe is warming and will continue to do so due to the "greenhouse effect" caused by emissions from fossil fuels trapping heat in the atmosphere. But they say we should not read too much into a single hot spell.

"As ever, you cannot say any one weather event is caused by global warming," said Asher Timms of Britain's Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. "But globally, it seems that there's quite a shift in our weather patterns."

Skeptics of the global warming theory, which predicts droughts and floods this century unless greenhouse gas emissions are curbed, say the media play up hot summer days for dramatic effect.

Bill O'Keefe, a board member of Washington think tank the George C. Marshall Institute and a consultant to the oil industry, said the record heat could be seen as part of a natural cycle of highs and lows.

TREND CLEAR

"I don't think there is any climatologist or meteorologist that would say you could draw a conclusion about any given year. There have been hotter periods in the past and we will have them in the future," O'Keefe told Reuters.

"If this persisted for a very long time than you might be able to conclude that human activities had an impact."

But many scientists say a warming trend is already clear.

US space agency NASA says 2005 was the warmest globally in more than a century and that the preceding three years were also the warmest since the 1890s.

The US National Climatic Data Centre said the first half of 2006 were the warmest six months since records began in 1895.

"NASA's averages for the world and what we produce here are far more informative than looking at the extremes in Britain, France or Italy like the summer of 2003," said Philip Jones, climate research professor at Britain's East Anglia University.

"It's the global averages that count."

"Ten of the last 12 years were the warmest since 1850. The global temperature (since then) rose 0.7 degrees Celsius and most climate models suggest it's going to continue to warm by 2 to 5 degrees Celsius this century," Jones said.

The skeptics say any warming over the last century can be explained by the fact that the planet was coming out of a cold period, known as the "Little Ice Age" and not due to a massive build-up of greenhouse gases after the Industrial Revolution.



Shah Meem Rafayat Chowdhury, a student of class five at Scholastica, receives the first prize of the World Environment Day Essay Competition 2006 from Environment and Forest Minister Tariqul Islam at the prize giving ceremony at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the city recently.