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Controls on military assistance to Somalia must be tightened

Amnesty International has called for arms transfers to the Somali government to be suspended until there are adequate safeguards to prevent weapons from being used to commit war crimes and human rights abuses.

In its latest briefing paper on the country, Amnesty International details US shipments of arms, including mortars, ammunition and cash for the purchase of weapons to the Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

These transfers were made despite substantial risks that such types of weapons could be used in indiscriminate attacks by TFG forces, or diverted to armed groups opposed to the TFG, who also commit gross and widespread abuses.

“International concern for the future of the Somali government has not been matched by an equal concern for the human rights of civilians,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International Deputy Director for Africa.

“Mortar attacks continue to claim lives – it is time for international donors to apply tighter controls to their support for the government”

Amnesty International’s briefing also details growing international programmes of military and police training for TFG forces, despite a lack of adequate oversight procedures.

The training is delivered in Somalia itself and in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Uganda. The European Union, France, Germany and Italy are involved, or have pledged funding for it.

Amnesty International calls for all states providing, financing or planning military and police training for the TFG to provide training in international humanitarian law and on arms management. They should also press for the establishment of oversight procedures for TFG forces.

A UN arms embargo on Somalia has been in place since 1992 but states can apply to the UN Sanctions Committee for exemptions to supply security assistance to the Somali government.

Amnesty International is urging the committee to apply criteria for assessing the risk that exemptions to the arms embargo will contribute to war crimes and human rights abuses, and to deny authorisations on this basis.

To be effectively implemented, Amnesty International argues that such criteria need to be enshrined in international law and universally applied to all arms transfers. The organisation calls on states to establish such common standards in an international Arms Trade Treaty.

Background

Somalia has been mired in armed conflict since the collapse of the Siad Barre government in 1991. Conflict intensified and unlawful killings of civilians increased after Ethiopian troops entered Somalia at the end of 2006 to help the TFG fight against several armed opposition groups from whom it has been seeking to regain territorial control.

Despite a peace agreement between the TFG and one armed group, the appointment of a President issued from the former armed opposition and the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia, armed opposition groups have continued attacks against the TFG. In May 2009, they launched a major offensive against the TFG, which currently only controls a small part of the capital Mogadishu.

In 2009, indiscriminate attacks by all parties to the armed conflict have resulted in thousands of civilians killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. The number of people internally displaced within Somalia is now 1.5 million and some 3.7 million are dependent on humanitarian assistance for their survival.