

WAKE UP!! WAKE UP!! IT'S YER... SNOWED UNDER...

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SHEIK BATTLE & RULE AS SCHNEWS LOCKS HORNS WITH AFRICAN INSURGENCY EMERGENCY

It's been out with the old and in with the new since Schnews last reported on what's happening in Somalia (Schnews 658). The UN/Western-backed 'Transitional Federal Government' fled its base in Baidoa when the Islamist militias of Al Shabab took over the town, with MPs fleeing alongside withdrawing Ethiopian troops. The UN rubber-stamped government that never was is no more.

After two years the Ethiopian occupation ended in January, and now there's a new sheriff in town. Well, Sharif actually - Sheik Sharif Ahmed to be exact. Sheik Sharif may be new to the job of president but it's not the first time he's held the reins of power. He was leader of the Islamic Courts in 2006, when they'd defeated the warlords and brought peace (and an amputatory Islamic justice) to the mean streets of Mogadishu.

That was until Ethiopia (backed up by US gunships) defeated the ICU and occupied Mogadishu, the African front in the lunatic 'War on Terror'. Since then Somalia has remained the worst crisis in Africa, and Mogadishu the world's most dangerous city. Some 10,000 people have been killed in the last 2 years, and Somalis are one of the world's largest refugee populations.

So even as Somalis breathe a sigh of relief that the Ethiopians have left, they're stuck the latest phase of their insurgency/civil war. The hardcore jihadists of the Al Shabab militia (formerly the ICU's military wing), have declared holy war against the Islamic Courts Union - claiming they've betrayed their religion by joining a secular government. Just this week several insurgent factions announced that they would merge to fight Sheik Ahmed's compromise government. On the other side African Union peacekeepers recently killed over a dozen civilians in Mogadishu after their army truck was hit by a roadside bomb.

Despite the chaos, Somalia, and particularly Mogadishu, has a thriving independent media sector. Radio and internet news outfits manage to report despite extreme danger. Scores of journalists have been killed in Somalia. On the 1st of January this year gunmen killed radio reporter Hassan Mayow Hassan. The most recent killing took place last Monday (2nd). The director of Horn Afrik Radio, Said Tahlil Ahmed, was ambushed on the way to a press conference called by the Al Shabab insurgent group.

On strict conditions of anonymity, Schnews interviewed one of Mogadishu's independent journalists who witnessed the killing of his colleague. He said:

"Recently a group of us journalists were contacted by the Al Shabab. There were 12 of us. Their press officer 'Hassan Haneshi' called a special meeting in a Mogadishu back street. The director of Horn Afrik, Said Tahlil Ahmed, was shot. The rest of us managed to escape. We told the Islamic Courts Union that we had been attacked and they posted guards outside our offices. Since then we've all been threatened. We received emails saying that other journalists and directors would be next if they didn't publish Al Shabab propaganda.

We practise ethical journalism. We are independent. We interview everybody - Al Shabab, the government, everybody. When the Ethiopians were here they would sometimes shut us down.

Al Shabab say that they want the foreign (African Union) troops out, but they have a hidden agenda. They want war for their propaganda. Even if the AU left they'd still find a reason to go on fighting.

The Al Shabab have captured Baidoa, so now there is no seat for the Somali parliament. Sheik Sharif and the new Islamic Courts government have been meeting for the last 3 days with clan elders about returning to Mogadishu. They are recruiting former insurgents into the new security forces. There is talk that this new government will re-open the ports, the roads, the airport.

We hope that this way Al Shabab will be marginalised. We hope that Sheik Sharif will bring peace to the country.

The warlords are very weak now. They don't have their militias any more. The ICU and the TFG are ready to compromise for the sake of the people. They used to fight each other but now they are working together. The situation in Mogadishu has dramatically changed. People have been trickling back over the last 3 weeks. I've seen lots of buses. People are very happy.

We want to see George W Bush taken to court for his crimes. He supported the Ethiopian invasion and gave them arms. Now there is a new president in the USA, president Sharif says that he sees a positive role for the US in Somalia. We hope that the new president will be better for Somalia."

* English Somali news: shabelle.net



BYE-BYELAW!

Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp (aig) emerged victorious from the court of appeal yesterday after an MoD byelaw criminalising camping outside the Atomic Weapons Factory in Aldermaston was overturned. The group's argument that the ban on camping violated the right to freedom of expression under articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights was upheld in a unanimous verdict. A representative from the collective, which has been camping outside the factory every month for an impressive 24 yrs now said, "We welcome today's outcome, which is not only a victory for the women's peace camp but an important judgement on the right to protest. AWPC will continue to hold our lawful camp to protest against the government's unlawful nuclear weapons. Another voice from the camp said they were looking forward to throwing 'more spanners in the works' and were planning big celebrations outside the factory at the weekend. Maybe they should take a leaf out of recent anti-arms trade actions and throw hammers in the works..."

* Check out: www.aldermaston.net

DIRTY TRICKS

Last Wednesday (4th) the high court ruled that information regarding the torture of Binyam Mohammed, one of the remaining UK Guantánamo detainees, is to remain secret after threats from the US to end intelligence co-operation with Britain. The ruling also states that information about UK involvement in Mohammed's capture and torture is not to be disclosed.

Clive Stafford Smith, Mohammed's lawyer and director of Reprieve told SchNEWS that it was 'horrifying' that the legal process could be derailed by threats and compared the actions of the US government to the Mafia. He also called the British governments capitulation 'reprehensible' and urged them to press the new Obama administration to rectify the situation - something they have yet to do.

Mohammed was captured on the Pakistan border while trying to return to Britain in 2002. A victim of extraordinary rendition, he was held in Pakistan for four months before being taken to Morocco for a further 18. In January '04 he was taken a second time, this time to the 'Dark Prison' in Afghanistan. After being transferred to Bagram he was then sent to Guantánamo where he has been since September '04.

Throughout his incarceration Mohammed has been tortured severely. He was hung up and beaten, and his genitals cut with a scalpel. During his interrogation the British government supplied information and questions and in Pakistan an MI5 officer joined in. Mohammed was originally charged with planning to plant a 'dirty bomb' but this was quickly dropped when it emerged that his 'confession' had been obtained by torture. No new charges have since been made.

Continued overleaf...

INFORMATION FOR ACTION

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For the last month Mohammed, who has still been and denied counselling, has been on hunger strike and is suffering greatly. According to his lawyer his situation now is as bad as anything he has been put through. He said "there is no reason for the delay in returning Mohammed to Britain and that he should be home already".

*Check out: www.cageprisoners.com

FIT-TED UP

From 16th February it will be punishable by up to ten years in the nick to "elicit or attempt to elicit information about members of the armed forces, intelligence services or policemen, where this information could be of use to a terrorist." This rather vaguely worded term (in the Counter Terrorism Act) is another of the government's and police's rather sweeping authoritarian laws that is just one more attack on traditional civil liberties. "Information that could be of use to a terrorist" is a rather vague and catch-all term. On being caught with any information involving police you need to show a reasonable excuse for holding the information, whatever reasonable is deemed to mean. For people who have been involved in social struggles and come up against the state it is perfectly reasonable to make notes of police misbehaviour and taking their photos and collar numbers - despite being a perfectly legal (and sensible) thing to do - could warrant arrest.

The Government and police make no apologies for hassling photo journalists. In a letter to the National Union of Journalists, the Minister for

TANK IN YOUR TIGER

Early last January, as the Sri Lankan army pushed into the remaining enclaves of territory held by separatist rebels the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, AKA the Tamil Tigers, two gunmen on a motorbike shot dead Lasantha Wickramatunga, editor of anti-establishment Sri Lankan newspaper The Sunday Leader. The following Sunday the Leader published his posthumous piece 'And then they came for me.' He blamed the government for his murder and condemned them for abuses and corruption. He also bleakly stated that while the Sri Lankan authorities might win a military victory against the Tigers it would be ultimately self-defeating. He warned that "...a military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self respect... The wounds of war will scar them forever, and you will also have an even more bitter and hateful Diaspora to contend with. A problem amenable to a political solution will thus become a festering wound that will yield strife for all eternity."

That military victory looks increasingly likely. In the last two months the Tigers have been driven out of most of their former territory, including the de facto capital, Kilinochchi. They've been pushed back into a 115-square-mile area on the coast, surrounded by army and navy.

Also trapped are around 250,000 civilians. The Tigers have stopped many from fleeing, forcing them deeper into their remaining territory. Those that have escaped, including whole families, have been held in military detention camps. The government has said it wants them to live in 'model villages' - heavily policed camps, instead of returning home. The government 'saftey zone' inside the territory has been shelled regularly.

security and counter-terrorism Vernon Coaker, justified police harassment of anyone using a camera in public, saying that, "This may be on the grounds of national security or there may be situations in which the taking of photographs may cause or lead to public order situations or inflame an already tense situation or raise security considerations." Yeah right - public order situation - police stopping and searching someone on a demo, you get your camera and observe the situation, police tell you to move you on, you say no, they get heavy handed and push you around... Hey Presto! Public Order Situation! A graphic example of the way police hassle photographers was seen at the anti-BBC Gaza demo on 24th January when a member of the police Forward Intelligence Team (U3037) grabbed journalist Justin Tallis who had taken a photo of him, tried to get the camera off him and said "You're not allowed to take photos of police officers". The only way to oppose this legislation is to resist any police repression of the right to publish information about police misbehaviour and the activities of the political police units: the National Extremism Tactical Coordination Unit and the Forward Intelligence Teams.

* "I'm a photographer... Not a terrorist" Media Event: 11am 16th February outside New Scotland Yard. Turn up with your camera and exercise your democratic right to take a photograph in a public place. see www.marcvallee.wordpress.com

* More info on resisting police intrusion: www.fitwatch.blogspot.com

It is nearly impossible to get accurate reports on the number of casualties from the area. Journalists and aid agencies have been banned while back in the Capital, Colombo, the media has been mostly cowed into silence by the Wickramatunga's assassination and a spate of other recent attacks. There have been estimates of around 400 deaths, based on health authorities' and UN reports.

It's a familiar position for Tamil civilians. Since 1983 when the Tigers began their campaign in reaction to anti-Tamil discrimination, civilians have suffered constant abuse from both sides. Thousands of Tamils have 'disappeared' over the years while even more have been incarcerated under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism act. The Tigers meanwhile ruled through fear, denying basic freedoms of expression, association, assembly and movement, assassinating Tamil opponents and forcing children to join their ranks.

Wickramatunga's comments regarding the diaspora are also already proving prescient. Last Saturday (31st) between 50,000 and 100,000 Tamils, maybe half of the British Tamil population, turned out in London, to protest the killings and abuses and demand a Tamil homeland, Tamil Eelam. With the Sri Lankan army continuing to kill and mistreat Tamils, more and more will see the Tigers as the only alternative to the violence and discrimination of the authorities.

Despite the difficulty in obtaining reliable reports from the area it does seem clear that the Tigers days as a major military force are numbered. But the pioneers of suicide bombing seem unlikely to just give up and go away. As one Sri Lankan journalist who was too scared to reveal his name put it, "The LTTE are a guerrilla outfit, they'll melt away and will come back with terrorism. It's not over. It's probably just begun."

WILDCAT FLAP

Last week's week wave of wildcat strikes affecting power stations, oil refineries, nuclear plants and other engines of Babylon - should have been a wet dream for the workerist left but was unfortunately complicated by the adoption as a slogan of Gordon Brown's pre-credit crunch boast of "British Jobs for British Workers". This was enough to throw sections of the left into disarray, with one tiny crypto-trotskyite splinter group Workers Liberty even organising a picket of UNITE's London HQ.

Protests at the TOTAL run Lindsay oil refinery centred around subcontractors IREM deciding to employ Italian and Portuguese workers. No doubt IREM hoped to save a few quid by bypassing industry wide pay rates and bringing in cheaper labour. One of international capital's main weapons against workers is the 'race to the bottom' normally involving jobs being exported, like call-centres bring relocated to Bangladesh). But the problem with construction is that it's impossible to export - if you want that power station built here you are going to need local labour.

Of course the construction industry in the U.K has in recent years been remarkably multi-ethnic - with workers drawn from all across the whole of the EU and beyond. In the boom-time this really only affected unskilled labourers. But as the recession bites and work becomes scarcer competition kicks in higher up the skills ladder. And that is essentially what the dispute is about.

The picture on the ground was confused - firstly by the mainstream press who insisted that the strike was largely anti-foreigner rather than anti-boss. In fact BNP organisers were kicked off picket lines early on at Lindsay, with one worker commenting on strike web forum www.bearfacts.co.uk "There's nowt working class about the BNP and if the strike had been about anything else where they couldn't stick their spin on it then they wouldn't be supporting it. The strike's anti-racist. It's the bosses being racist and fascist. If the BNP turn up at our picket when we walk out then I know a few of us won't be standing for it and will tell them to f**k off in no uncertain terms." Another South Wales refinery worker said "In the engineering industry, especially in oil and gas, the job takes you worldwide. Who can blame foreign workers, who also face threats of redundancy and unemployment, who just want to work and support their family? What happened to international worker solidarity?"

PARTY & PROTEST

For listings updated weekly see
* www.schnews.org.uk/pap *

...and finally...

The Morning Star, faithful cheerleader for industrial action and lefty agitation for decades, has been well and truly hoisted by its own petard this week after its own workers agreed to vote on strike action. 'Star workers are angry after the newspaper backed out of an agreement to up their pay. Currently reporters and sub-editors take home around £270 a week, so its no wonder they're feeling hard done by- especially after they kept the rag running from their homes after a fire gutted the offices.

It remains to be seen whether they'll get a write up...

Disclaimer

SchNEWS warns all readers - don't wait for a cold snap - strike while the iron is hot! - Honest!

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