

Somali legislators flee abroad, parliament paralysed

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- * Parliamentarians seek safety abroad
- * Rebel leader Aweys opposes foreign intervention

NAIROBI, June 24 (Reuters) - Scores of Somali legislators have fled violence at home to the safety of other countries in Africa, Europe and the United States, leaving the nation's parliament without a quorum to meet. Violence from an Islamist-led insurgency has worsened this month, with a minister, the Mogadishu police chief, and a legislator all killed. The government, which controls little but a few parts of the capital, has declared a state of emergency.

With reports of foreign jihadists streaming into Somalia, Western security services are frightened Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network may get a grip on the failed Horn of Africa state that has been without central government for 18 years.

Needing two-thirds of legislators present to meet, Somalia's 550-seat parliament has not convened since April 25. Officials said on Wednesday that 288 members of parliament (MPs) were abroad, with only about 50 on official visits.

The rest were in neighbours Kenya and Djibouti, European nations such as Sweden, Britain, the Netherlands and Norway, and the United States, the officials said.

"I cannot be a member of a government that cannot protect me," Abdalla Haji Ali, an MP who left for Kenya last week, told Reuters. "In Somalia, nobody is safe."

Parliament speaker Sheikh Aden Mohamed Madobe has urged the MPs to return, and Somalia's Finance Ministry has blocked the salaries of 144 legislators abroad, officials said.

In Nairobi on Wednesday, plenty of Somali MPs could be seen sipping tea and talking politics in various hotels and cafes.

"As legislators, we have responsibility and every one of us should perform his duty in Mogadishu," one legislator who has stayed in Mogadishu, Sheikh Ahmed Moalim, told Reuters.

"Before you decide to flee, you have to resign officially if you realise that you cannot work in this environment."

"GOVERNMENT FIDDLES, SOMALIA BURNS"

Islamist rebel leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys held a news conference in Mogadishu to denounce the government's call at the weekend for foreign forces to come to its aid.

The African Union has a 4,300-strong force guarding government and other installations in Mogadishu, but has been unable to stem violence and has been targeted by the rebels.

Kenya has said it supports international efforts to get more troops into Somalia, but Aweys thanked Nairobi for declining to send its soldiers across the border. "If they deal with us well, we will deal with them well as a good neighbour," he said.

Nairobi expatriate circles have been awash with rumours of planned attacks by Somali militants. "The fighting will stop when the foreign enemy forces leave the country and Somalis come together for talks," Aweys added. "Nothing remains of the puppet Somali government."

The United Nations and Western powers back President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed's government, but are increasingly frustrated over how to help him stabilise Somalia.

Ahmed, himself a moderate Islamist, was elected by parliament at a U.N.-sponsored process in Djibouti in January.

"The situation has gone from bad to worse to worst, presenting the entire Horn of Africa with a security crisis of the first order," U.S. analyst Peter Pham said in a paper.

"If the TFG (government) is 'fiddling' while Somalia burns, it is doing so with a full orchestral accompaniment provided by an international community that apparently lacks either the will or the imagination (or both) to do anything else."

Gus Selassie, an analyst for IHS Global Insight think-tank, was equally pessimistic. "There appears to be an extreme reluctance on the part of the international community, including neighbouring countries and friendly governments such as Ethiopia, to heed the TFG's desperate calls," he wrote in another analysis.

"Both the security and humanitarian situation will have to worsen considerably before anyone will aid the TFG." (Additional reporting by Ibrahim Mohamed and Abdi Guled in Mogadishu; Writing by Andrew Cawthorne in Nairobi)