

Eritrea says talks not force right approach to Somalia



AFP/File – Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh Mohammed attends a summit meeting of African Union (AU) member ...

by Aaron Maasho Aaron Maasho – Sat Jul 24, 1:37 pm ET

KAMPALA (AFP) – Africa should talk to Somalia's Shebab rebels instead of sending in more troops, Eritrea said Saturday as the continent's leaders gathered in Kampala for a summit dominated by the Somali conflict.

Two weeks after suicide attacks claimed by the Al Qaeda-linked group killed 76 people in the Ugandan capital, the African Union announced more troops were on the way to boost its AMISOM force in Mogadishu.

But Saleh, who dismissed accusations that Eritrea has been supporting the Shebab, warned that further troop deployments would only exacerbate regional insecurity.

"We believe that military involvement cannot bring a peaceful solution," Eritrean Foreign Minister Osman Saleh told AFP on the sidelines of the pre-summit ministerial gathering.

AMISOM was first deployed in 2007 to protect the western-backed transitional federal government (TFG) in Mogadishu. But it has failed to stabilize the country and been pinned back by the Shebab and their Hezb al-Islam allies.

"We say that priority should be given to a political situation," he added.

"An all-inclusive political process has to take place, including Shebab, Hezb al-Islam, the TFG, Puntland and Somaliland," he said referring to the rival movements and breakaway regions inside Somalia.

The AU's top executive, Jean Ping, announced on Friday that Guinea was ready to send a battalion to boost AMISOM's current troop level, which currently comprises just over 6,000 Ugandans and Burundians.

Angola, Mozambique and South Africa are also expected to contribute forces, according to diplomats.

Some observers believe a beefed-up AMISOM could significantly weaken the Shebab and reduce their presence in Mogadishu if given a more robust mandate: the force's present task however is mainly to protect the Somali government.

Saleh however drew parallels with Afghanistan, where an international force led by the United States has been bogged down in a fight against Taliban insurgents since 2001.

"There may be certain terrorist elements, but how can we wipe out this thing? Not by bringing international forces inside," he said.

"Otherwise it's going to be like Iraq and Afghanistan. The issue in Afghanistan is not solved... Now they are saying that we have to deal with constructive engagement with the Taliban. Why not here?" Saleh added.

"AMISOM might increase its size now and then, but so did Ethiopia," he continued, referring to the December 2006-January 2009 Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia in support of the government there.

"They did nothing but create the worst humanitarian situation in the world. In this way you cannot save Somalia," Saleh added.

The Eritrean minister will represent President Isaias Afewerki, who has rarely attended the bloc's meetings since the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, where the AU's headquarters are located.

Some African diplomats are skeptical of Asmara's renewed involvement in the bloc's activities, which contradicts Isaias' longstanding criticism over a perceived bias towards Addis Ababa.

They say Eritrea is only acting after it was slapped with UN sanctions in 2009 over the "destabilizing" impact of its alleged involvement in Somalia on the region.

Earlier in March, a UN report claimed the Red Sea state continued to support armed Islamist groups fighting the Somali government, in violation of an arms embargo.

On Tuesday, a senior US lawmaker called for Eritrea to be added to a terrorism blacklist, which currently only includes Cuba, Iran, Sudan and Syria.

Saleh dismissed the claims however.

"This is an allegation that doesn't have any evidence. We haven't supported the Shebab," he said.