

U.S. Relies on Contractors in Somalia Conflict

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A Ugandan soldier leads Richard Rouget, a military adviser with Bancroft Global Development, to the roof of a building to monitor a firefight. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

MOGADISHU, Somalia – Richard Rouget, a gun for hire over two decades of bloody African conflict, is the unlikely face of the American campaign against militants in Somalia.

A husky former French Army officer, Mr. Rouget, 51, commanded a group of foreign fighters during Ivory Coast’s civil war in 2003, was convicted by a South African court of selling his military services and did a stint in the presidential guard of the Comoros Islands, an archipelago plagued by political tumult and coup attempts.

Now Mr. Rouget works for Bancroft Global Development, an American private security company that the State Department has indirectly financed to train African troops who have fought a pitched urban battle in the ruins of this city against the Shabab, the Somali militant group allied with Al Qaeda.

The company plays a vital part in the conflict now raging inside Somalia, a country that has been effectively ungoverned and mired in chaos for years. The

fight against the Shabab, a group that United States officials fear could someday carry out strikes against the West, has mostly been outsourced to African soldiers and private companies out of reluctance to send American troops back into a country they hastily exited nearly two decades ago.

“We do not want an American footprint or boot on the ground,” said Johnnie Carson, the Obama administration’s top State Department official for Africa.

A visible United States military presence would be provocative, he said, partly because of Somalia’s history as a graveyard for American missions – including the “Black Hawk Down” episode in 1993, when Somali militiamen killed 18 American service members.

Still, over the past year, the United States has quietly stepped up operations inside Somalia, American officials acknowledge. The Central Intelligence Agency, which largely finances the country’s spy agency, has covertly trained Somali intelligence operatives, helped build a large base at Mogadishu’s airport – Somalis call it “the Pink House” for the reddish hue of its buildings or “Guantánamo” for its ties to the United States – and carried out joint interrogations of suspected terrorists with their counterparts in a ramshackle Somali prison.

The Pentagon has turned to strikes by armed drone aircraft to kill Shabab militants and recently approved \$45 million in arms shipments to African troops fighting in Somalia.

But this is a piecemeal approach that many American officials believe will not be enough to suppress the Shabab over the long run. In interviews, more than a dozen current and former United States officials and experts described an overall American strategy in Somalia that has been troubled by a lack of focus and

internal battles over the past decade. While the United States has significantly stepped up clandestine operations in Pakistan and Yemen, American officials are deeply worried about Somalia but cannot agree on the risks versus the rewards of escalating military strikes here.

“I think that neither the international community in general nor the U.S. government in particular really knows what to do with the failure of the political process in Somalia,” said J. Peter Pham, director of the Africa program at the Atlantic Council, a Washington research institution.

For months, officials said, the State Department has been at odds with some military and intelligence officials about whether striking sites suspected of being militant camps in Somalia’s southern territories or carrying out American commando raids to kill militant leaders would significantly weaken the Shabab – or instead bolster its ranks by allowing the group to present itself as the underdog against a foreign power.

Lauren Ploch, an East Africa expert at the Congressional Research Service, said that the Obama administration was confronted with many of the same problems that had vexed its predecessors – “balancing the risks of an on-the-ground presence” against the risks of using “third parties” to carry out the American strategy in Somalia.

Teaching Fighting Skills

The Shabab has already shown its ability to strike beyond Somalia, killing dozens of Ugandans last summer in a suicide attack that many believe was a reprisal for the Ugandan government’s decision to send troops to Somalia. Now, though, thanks in part to Bancroft, the private security company, the militants have been forced into retreat. Several United Nations and African Union officials credit the work of Bancroft with improving the fighting skills of the African troops in Somalia, who this past weekend forced Shabab militants to withdraw from Mogadishu, the capital, for the first time in years.

Like other security companies in Somalia, Bancroft has thrived as a proxy of sorts for the American government. Based in a mansion along Embassy Row

in Washington, Bancroft is a nonprofit enterprise run by Michael Stock, a 34-year-old Virginia native who founded the company not long after graduating from Princeton in 1999. He used some of his family’s banking fortune to set up Bancroft as a small land-mine clearing operation.

In recent years, the company has expanded its mission in Somalia and now runs one of the only fortified camps in Mogadishu – a warren of prefabricated buildings rimmed with sand bags a stone’s throw from the city’s decrepit, seaside airport.

The Bancroft camp operates as a spartan hotel for visiting aid workers, diplomats and journalists. But the company’s real income has come from the United States government, albeit circuitously. The governments of Uganda and Burundi pay Bancroft millions of dollars to train their soldiers for counterinsurgency missions in Somalia under an African Union banner, money that the State Department then reimburses to the two African nations. Since 2010, Bancroft has collected about \$7 million through this arrangement.

Both American and United Nations officials said that Bancroft’s team in Mogadishu – a mixture of about 40 former South African, French and Scandinavian soldiers who call themselves “mentors” – has steadily improved the skills of the African troops and cut down on civilian casualties by persuading the troops to stop lobbing artillery shells into crowded parts of Mogadishu. One Western consultant who works with the African Union credits Bancroft with helping “turn a bush army into an urban fighting force.”

The advisers typically work from the front lines – showing the troops how to build sniper pits or smash holes in walls to move between houses.

“Urban fighting is a war of attrition, you nibble, nibble, nibble,” said Mr. Rouget, the Bancroft contractor. Last year, he was wounded in Mogadishu when a piece of shrapnel from a Shabab rocket explosion sliced through his thigh.

Still, he seems to thoroughly enjoy his work. “Give me some technicals” – a term for heavily armed pickup trucks – “and some savages and I’m happy,” he joked.

Privatizing War

Some critics view the role played by Mr. Rouget and other contractors as a troubling trend : relying on private companies to fight the battles that nations have no stomach for. Some American Congressional officials investigating the money being spent for operations in Somalia said that opaque arrangements like those for Bancroft – where money is passed through foreign governments – made it difficult to properly track how the funds were spent.

It also makes it harder for American officials to monitor who is being hired for the Somalia mission. In Bancroft’s case, some trainers are veterans of Africa’s bush wars who sometimes use aliases in the countries where they fought. Mr. Rouget, for example, used the name Colonel Sanders.

He denies that he is a mercenary, and said that his conviction in a South African court was “political,” more a “regulatory infraction” than a crime. He added that the French government, which sent peacekeeping troops to Ivory Coast, was well aware of his activities there.

Mr. Stock, Bancroft’s president, also flatly rejects the idea that his employees are mercenaries, insisting that the trainers do not participate in direct combat with Shabab fighters and are supported by legitimate governments.

“Mercenary activity is antithetical to the fundamental purposes for which Bancroft exists,” he said, adding that the company “does not engage in covert, clandestine or otherwise secret activities.”

He did say, though, that there is only a small pool of people Bancroft can hire who have experience fighting in African wars.

In recent years, according to a United Nations report, many companies have waded into Somalia’s chaos with contracts to protect Somali politicians, train African troops and build a combat force to battle armed Somali pirates.

The report provides new details about an operation by the South African firm Saracen International to train a 1,000-member antipiracy militia for the government of Puntland, a semiautonomous region in northern Somalia, effectively creating “the best-equipped indigenous military force anywhere in So-

malia.” Using shell companies, some of which the United Nations report links to Erik Prince, who founded the Blackwater Worldwide security company, Saracen secretly shipped military equipment – which the report says violated an arms embargo – into northern Somalia on cargo planes leaving from Uganda and the United Arab Emirates. Several American officials have said that the Emirates, concerned about the piracy epidemic, have been secretly financing the Saracen operation.

Aid From the Pentagon

The Pentagon has recently told Congress that it plans to send nearly \$45 million worth of military equipment to bolster the Ugandan and Burundian troops. The arms package includes transport trucks, body armor, night vision goggles and even four small drone aircraft that the African troops can use to spy on Shabab positions.

Unlike regular Somali government troops, the C.I.A.-trained Somali commandos are outfitted with new weapons and flak jackets, and are given sunglasses and ski masks to conceal their identities. They are part of the Somali National Security Agency – an intelligence organization financed largely by the C.I.A. – which answers to Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government. Many in Mogadishu, though, believe that the Somali intelligence service is building a power base independent of the weak government.

One Somali official, speaking only on the condition of anonymity, said that the spy service was becoming a “government within a government.”

“No one, not even the president, knows what the N.S.A. is doing,” he said. “The Americans are creating a monster.”

The C.I.A. Plays a Role

The C.I.A. has also occasionally joined Somali operatives in interrogating prisoners, including Ahmed Abdullahi Hassan, a Kenyan arrested in Nairobi in 2009 on an American intelligence tip and handed over to Somalia by the Kenyans. The C.I.A. operations in Somalia were first reported last month by the magazine *The Nation*.

An American official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of restrictions against discussing relationships with foreign intelligence services, said that agency officers had questioned Mr. Hassan in a Somali prison under strict interrogation rules.

“The host country must give credible assurances that suspects will be treated humanely,” the official said, and intelligence officials “must be convinced that the individual in custody has time-sensitive information about terrorist operations targeting U.S. interests.”

A C.I.A. spokeswoman said that the spy agency was not holding suspects in secret American prisons, as it did in the years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

“The C.I.A. does not run prisons in Somalia or anywhere else, period,” said the spokeswoman, Marie Harf. “The C.I.A.’s detention and interrogation program ended over two and a half years ago.”

In Washington, American officials said debates were under way about just how much the United States should rely on clandestine militia training and armed drone strikes to fight the Shabab. Over the past year, the American Embassy in Nairobi, according to one American official, has become a hive of military and intelligence operatives who are “chomping at the bit” to escalate operations in Somalia. But Mr. Carson, the State Department official, has opposed the drone strikes because of the risk of turning more Somalis toward the Shabab, according to several officials.

In a telephone interview, he played down any bureaucratic disagreements and rejected criticism that America’s approach toward Somalia had been ad hoc. It is a country with historically difficult problems, he said, and the American support to the African peacekeepers has helped beat back the Shabab’s forces.

And as for the rest of southern Somalia, still firmly in the Shabab’s hands?

“One step at a time, he said. “One step at a time.”

Mr. Stock, Bancroft’s president, said that bickering in Washington about how to contain the Shabab threat had made the American government even more dependent on companies like his.

As he put it, “We’re the only game in town.”

Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Mogadishu, and Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt from Washington.

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