Beat: News

Al-Shabab Faces Pushback in Ethiopia's Somali Region

Harun Maruf | VOA News

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ARAC International Global Media Partners - Ethiopia's Somali region is mobilizing against al-Shabab militants to prevent further incursions by the group.

The region had been hailed as the most peaceful in Ethiopia since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power in 2018. But that was put to the test three weeks ago when al-Shabab fighters forced their way into the region, igniting a deadly confrontation deep in Ethiopia.

Ethiopia has now amassed troops along the border for possible military operations against al-Shabab. But the Somali region is also mobilizing community leaders including religious scholars, women and traditional elders. Business leaders have pledged funds and pastoralists have donated livestock to the security forces. The apparent goal is to resist infiltration of al-Shabab's ideology in a region known for its tolerance and peaceful cohabitation between various faith communities.

Sheikh Mohamed Hassan Burawi is one of the clerics who spoke out against al-Shabab during a recent government-organized gathering in the region's capital, Jigjiga.

"They want to manipulate people by saying they want to spread religion and jihad," Burawi told VOA Somali in a phone interview. "We have to give people awareness that what these men are preaching is not jihad, but it's independent of the religion."

Burawi said the Somali region does not need al-Shabab's intervention, and said the scholars are obliged to speak at mosques and inform the public about the militant organization.

"This is the right time to speak out," he said. "We should not give these men a chance, the government should not give them a chance and the clerics should not give them a chance. We have to stop them here."

Samira Gaid, a security expert and executive director of the Mogadishu-based Hiraal Institute, said the community appears for now to be ready to reject any al-Shabab incursion.

She said al-Shabab has been struggling to build a support base inside Somali Region.

Although extremist groups in Somalia so far have failed to set up permanent bases in Ethiopia, they have succeeded in recruitment. Ali Diyaar, commander of al-Shabab's Ethiopia front, and several other commanders who were reportedly involved in the recent incursion are from the region. Al-Shabab has also recruited from other Ethiopian communities, including from the Oromo.

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