

U.S. Navy P-3 Orion, elite Rangers deployed in search

The Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — The U.S. Navy P-3 Orion drones high over Mogadishu, tracing a precise pattern through the sky in a high-tech search for one man in a million.

The mission is specific: Find Gen. Mohamed Farah Aidid, the elusive Somali warlord accused by the United Nations of masterminding dozens of attacks on U.N. personnel. Four Americans and 24 Pakistanis are among the casualties.

From its position nearly a mile high, the Orion could count the hairs on Aidid's balding head — if only it can find him.

The Navy has long used the four-engine Orion to hunt for submarines and more recently for drug smugglers along America's long coasts.

Flying at 5,000 feet, it is packed with ultra-modern electronics — highly sensitive listening devices and cameras that when used in space can capture the late motto off an automobile license plate.

But to find Aidid, the Orion and a clutch of high-tech helicopters with similar capabilities will also need luck.

The search involves scanning a city that the fugitive knows like the back of his hand and where many of its 1 million residents support him.

Jonathan Howe, the retired U.S. admiral who is in overall charge of the U.N. operation in Somalia, says Aidid's day-by-day whereabouts are generally known.

Others are not so sure. "Aidid appears to leave little trace of a signature and that is a challenge even with our technology," said Maj. David Stockwell, a spokesman for the military side of the U.N. operation.

In communications intelligence, a "signature" is a commonly used radio frequency, a recognizable voice on constantly changing frequencies or a familiar pattern of non-voice communications.

Even if those communications are encoded, they can be recognized and their sources pinpointed.

The search for Aidid began after 24 Pakistani peacekeepers were killed June 5 in a series of ambushes in south Mogadishu, the part of the city controlled by Aidid.

A week later, U.N. forces began their own nightly air and ground assaults on Aidid's weapons caches.

On June 17, Howe announced what was already clear, that Aidid was a wanted man, and the United Nations put a \$25,000 bounty on his head.

The U.N. attacks included a fiery bombardment of

Aidid's home and principal command and control center on July 12. The International Red Cross says 54 Somalis died and 174 were wounded.

In retaliation, a Somali mob set upon reporters, photographers and television news crews with knives, rocks and guns, killing an Associated Press photographer and three Reuters employees.

The assaults drove Aidid underground and brought a backlash from some countries, U.S. lawmakers and charitable organizations.

Critics said the United Nations, in seeking to punish the warlord, was forsaking the humanitarian role that brought it to Somalia in the first place.

Howe and the U.N. military argued otherwise. They could continue their effort to capture Aidid, they said, without jeopardizing their mission to rebuild a nation shattered by three years of civil war, famine and anarchy.

More than 350,000 people died in 1992 alone before U.S. troops were dispatched in December; the United Nations

assumed control in May.

The search for Aidid went on, but with a much lower profile.

That changed Aug. 8, when a remotely detonated mine blew up a U.S. military vehicle and killed four Americans.

The attack was blamed on Aidid. The search quickly shifted from low gear into high.

President Clinton authorized the deployment of 400 elite Rangers to Somalia to augment the Army's Rapid Reaction Force of 1,150 soldiers already on hand.

The Americans assist a U.N. force of 25,000 from 28 nations, including 4,000 U.S. logistics personnel, but remain under U.S. command.

The Rangers brought the tools, training and skills that the U.N. coalition lacked in previous efforts to capture Aidid. Not least among these tools is the Orion.

Still, "technology can't do the job alone," Stockwell said, "and other forms of intelligence, like human intelligence, are often imprecise."

It is in human intelligence that the U.N. military effort appears most lacking.

There has been no rush of Somalis claiming the \$25,000 reward.

"Some people support Aidid, others are indifferent," Stockwell said.

"Those who live in the large middle ground will probably not dispute his presence in their areas."

"Aidid appears to leave little trace of a signature and that is a challenge even with our technology."

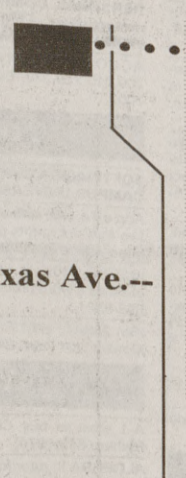
— Maj. David Stockwell, spokesman for military side of U.N. operation

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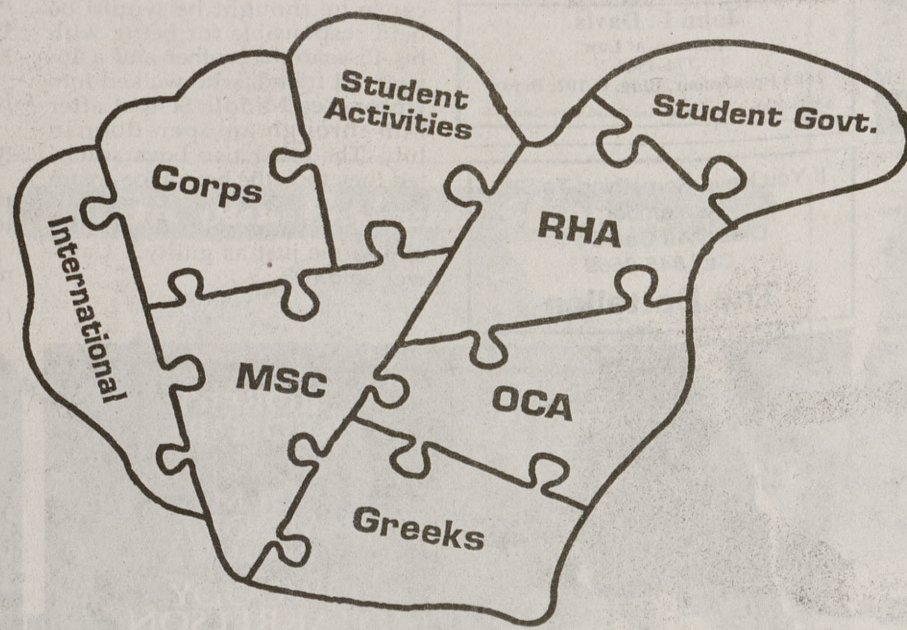
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