US SHUTS DOWN ITS DRONE BASE IN ETHIOPIA

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Report by Kaleyesus Bekele, Addis Ababa: The US Air force has shut down its drone base in southern part of Ethiopia, Arbaminch town that it has been using to fight the islamist militant group in Somalia, Al Shabab, for the past four years.

In 2009-2010 the US Air Force invested millions of dollars to upgraded the Arbaminch Airport runway and built a small annex to house a fleet of drones called Reaper that can be equipped with Hellfire missiles and satellite-guided bombs. The air force deployed the drones in early 2011 and has been flying them since then on counter terrorism missions as part of a US led proxy war against an al-qaeda affiliate in warn torn Somalia.

The US drone base compound in Arbamich airport is about half an acre in size and is surrounded by high fences, security screens and lights on extended poles. Arba Minch is located about 300 miles south of Addis Ababa and about 600 miles west of the Somali border.

The drones began flying missions in early 2011 over neighboring Somalia, where the United States and its allies in the region have been targeting al Shabab, a militant Islamist group connected to al-Qaeda.

Reliable sources told The Reporter that the US Air force recently dismantled the Arbaminch drone

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base and redeployed its military personnel who have been working at the base. Sources said the drone clamshell-shape hangar has been removed and the US military personnel have packed and left the base.

The US embassy in Addis Ababa confirmed that there are no US military personnel in Arbaminch. In a written response to The Reporter spokes person of the embassy, David Kennedy, stated that US military personnel are no longer in Arbaminch.

“In our ongoing bilateral discussions on our defense cooperation, we reached a mutual decision that our presence in Arbaminch is not required at this time. As we work with our African partners, our mutual needs change over time and a determination was made that our use of facilities in Arbaminch is no longer necessary,” Kennedy said. He said that the US presence in Arbaminch was never meant to be permanent.

Ethiopia is a longtime U.S. ally in the fight against al-Shabab, the militant group that has fomented instability in war-torn Somalia and launched attacks in Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere in the region.

Ethiopian defense forces first invaded Somalia in 2006 and rooted out the Islamic Court Union (ICU), the precursor of Al Shabab, from Moquadishu. Later on members of the ICU regrouped themselves and formed Al Shabab. With a series of military operations Ethiopian defense forces managed to weaken the militant group.

The US government provides military aid to Ethiopia. Last year the US air force donated a C130 Hercules military transport plane to the Ethiopian Air force.

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