

Exclusive: Somalia asks peacekeepers to slow withdrawal, fears Islamist resurgence

MOGADISHU, June 20 (Reuters) - Somalia's government is seeking to slow the withdrawal of African peacekeepers and warning of a potential security vacuum, documents seen by Reuters show, with neighbouring countries fretting that resurgent al Shabaab militants could seize power.

The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), a peacekeeping force, is committed to withdrawing by Dec. 31, when a smaller new force is expected to replace it.

However, in a letter last month to the acting chair of the African Union Peace and Security Council the government asked to delay until September the withdrawal of half the 4,000 troops due to leave by the end of June. The letter has not been reported before.

The government had previously recommended, in a joint assessment with the AU in March, reviewed by Reuters, that the overall withdrawal timeline be adjusted "based on the actual readiness and capabilities" of Somali forces. The joint assessment, which was mandated by the U.N. Security Council, warned that a "hasty drawdown of ATMIS personnel will contribute to a security vacuum".

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