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## **Somali Islamic Force Flees Last Stronghold**

By Stephanie McCrummen

NAIROBI — Islamic fighters fled their last stronghold in Somalia near the port city of Kismaayo early Monday in the face of battle with Ethiopian troops backing Somalia's weak transitional government, according to news reports.

A convoy of heavily armed trucks carrying Islamic Courts fighters was seen headed south toward Kenya, government spokesman Abdirahman Dinari told the Associated Press. "The Islamists have fled Kismaayo, and our troops are on the way," Dinari said. Government forces were approaching Kismaayo slowly because of land mines, residents north of the city said.

Hundreds of gunmen who had apparently abandoned the Islamic movement looted warehouses where the group stored weapons and ammunition, AP reported. Gangs took to the streets as the tension of impending battle gave way to chaos in the city, witnesses said.

"Everything is out of control. Everyone has a gun, and gangs are looting everything now that the Islamists have left," Sheik Musa Salad, a businessman, said.

On Sunday, Islamic movement forces appeared to be digging in for battle in the forested area, and a leader of the movement in Kismaayo vowed to wage a relentless campaign against the Ethiopians, who are widely perceived in Somalia as invaders, not liberators.

"Even if we are defeated, we will start an insurgency," Ahmed Mohamed Islan told the Associated Press in Kismaayo. "We will kill every Somali that supports the government and the Ethiopians."

As the fighting began Saturday, thousands of men, women and children ran for their lives from the farming town of Jilib twp, just north of Kismaayo along the Indian Ocean coast, relief workers said.

Over the past 11 days, the Ethiopian military has pushed the Islamic movement from power and essentially installed the long-exiled transitional government, which has been struggling since then to negotiate the complex clan politics of the chaotic Somali capital, Mogadishu.

As many as 2,000 to 3,000 fighters loyal to the Islamic movement, which had been expanding its control over the country since June, had retreated to the Kismaayo area. It is unclear how well-armed the movement is, but the Ethiopian military is the strongest in Africa, equipped with tanks, helicopters and fighter jets.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has said his country's troops will remain in Somalia until they have captured "extremist" elements within the Islamic Courts, a task he estimated would take several weeks at most.

Meles has justified the military action in Somalia by accusing the Islamic movement of supporting insurgent groups in Ethiopia. The movement has denied the charge, and regional analysts say it is exaggerated. African Union and Arab League officials have called on Ethiopia to withdraw immediately.

The United States and Ethiopia accuse the Islamic movement of harboring three al-Qaeda suspects in the 1998 bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Islamic leaders have called that allegation propaganda. Analysts say the three suspects, who may be hiding in the Kismaayo area, were in Somalia long before the Islamic movement took power in June.

Warlords who called themselves an "anti-terrorism" coalition and received financial backing from the United States had controlled the country before the Islamic movement. The warlords ruled by threats, bribes and general thuggery, and Somalis, who tend to be moderate Muslims, eventually threw their support behind the Courts, which established order based on Islamic law, often with severity.

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