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Ethiopian Jets Bomb Somalia Areas

By Reuters

BAIDOA, Somalia — Ethiopian forces, committed to defending an interim Somali government holed up in the town of Baidoa, launched airstrikes on Sunday against Islamist fighters across the country, witnesses said.

Ethiopian Information Minister Berhan Hailu said the operation targeted several fronts including Dinsoor, Bandiradley and Baladwayne and the town of Buur Hakaba—close to the administration's encircled south-central base Baidoa.

It was the first use of airstrikes and the first public admission by Ethiopia of its involvement in Somalia, whose interim government is surrounded by heavily armed fighters of the powerful Somalia Islamic Courts Council (SICC).

"After too much patience, the Ethiopian government has taken self-defensive measures and started counter-attacking the aggressive extremist forces of the Islamic Courts and foreign terrorist groups," Berhan told Reuters.

Diplomats fear Addis Ababa's announcement of its involvement in Somalia has flagged off a war ensnaring Horn of Africa rivals Ethiopia and Eritrea, and possibly attracting foreign jihadists and triggering suicide bombings in east Africa.

Berhan gave no details, but Somali witnesses reported Ethiopian planes dropping bombs and firing missiles on two areas as fighting between the Islamists and pro-government forces raged for a sixth day.

Resident Abdirashid Hassan said he saw planes drop bombs on the outskirts of Baladwayne, 190 miles (300 km) north of the capital Mogadishu.

Another witness, businessman Farah Osman, said two Ethiopian planes fired missiles further north, near Bandiradley.

A senior Islamist, Sheikh Mahmud Ibrahim Suley, accused the Ethiopians of using MiG warplanes and helicopters.

"Today the war is being fought by land and air," he told reporters in Mogadishu, adding that Islamists had destroyed five Ethiopian tanks. He did not comment on casualties.

Both sides say they have killed hundreds since the fighting began on Tuesday, although aid agencies report dozens of dead.

For months, witnesses have reported seeing thousands of Ethiopian troops deployed in Somalia to protect the government against the newly-powerful Islamists.

The SICC captured the capital Mogadishu and a swathe of southern Somalia in June, challenging the Western-backed government's aim to restore central rule for the first time since the 1991 ouster of a dictator.

Memories

Fighters loyal to both sides started firing shells, rockets and machine guns at each other shortly after dawn on Sunday, witnesses said, in battles that spread to four fronts.

Military experts estimate Ethiopia has 15,000-20,000 troops in Somalia, while Eritrea has about 2,000 behind the Islamists.

Asmara denies the accusation, while Addis Ababa previously admitted to having a few hundred military trainers in Baidoa.

"Fighting is going on from one part of the country to the other. The Islamic Courts have ignited the war they promised yesterday," Information Minister Ali Ahmed Jama "Jangali" told Reuters. "They will lose in this fighting."

An Islamist fighter speaking from close to the semi-autonomous Puntland region, home of interim President Abdullahi Yusuf, said: "Now there is a full-blown war."

Fighting was reported near Daynunay, the government's forward military base about 20 km (12 miles) southeast of Baidoa. Battles also broke out in Manas, west of Baidoa, Kalaber to the north and Bandiradley, close to the border with Puntland with many people fleeing.

Witnesses reported an unmarked C-130 circling above Galkaayo, close to Puntland.

In Mogadishu, sombre-faced groups of men gathered to listen to radio news broadcasts and some made calls to relatives in the battle zones.

Late on Friday, a van with loudspeakers patrolled the streets of the war-scarred city asking residents and shopkeepers to contribute to the "jihad" efforts.

Several radio stations aired patriotic songs, urging Somalis to defend their country, some dating from the 1977-78 Ogaden war, fought against a backdrop of shifting Cold War alliances.

During that war, Ethiopia's army crushed Somali troops who tried to lay claim to the ethnically Somali Ogaden region.

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