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Ethiopia Attacks Somali Airports

By Reuters

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Ethiopian warplanes attacked two Islamist-held airfields Monday in Somalia, including in the capital, Mogadishu, in the most dramatic strikes yet of a war threatening to engulf the Horn of Africa.

Witnesses said the attacks came hours after neighboring Ethiopia formally declared war, saying it was protecting its sovereignty against an Islamist movement.

Fighting raged for a seventh day near Daynunay, close to the town of Baidoa, seat of Somalia's weak interim government that Ethiopia backs.

Witnesses reported truckloads of Ethiopian wounded being evacuated, and Islamist soldiers were said to be reciting the Koran as they went into battle.

A MiG fighter struck Mogadishu's international airport with machine-gun fire soon after dawn, airport managing director Abdirahim Adan told Reuters.

Three jets later attacked Somalia's biggest military airfield at Baledogle, 60 miles (100 kilometers) west of Mogadishu.

"They are targeting the runway, and I can see it being hit," said an Islamist fighter who asked not to be named.

The week of intense fighting between Islamists and the Ethiopian- and Western- backed secular interim government has turned long-running hostilities into open war.

Analysts say Ethiopia seems to have halted the initial Islamist assault and saved the government from being overrun.

The Somalia Islamic Courts Council's Web site hailed "mujahedeen" troops who, it said, chanted passages from the Koran as they went into battle against militarily superior Ethiopian "crusaders."

Addis Ababa and Washington say the Islamists, who hold most of southern Somalia after seizing Mogadishu in June, are backed by al Qaeda and by Ethiopia's enemy, Eritrea.

Ethiopia has vowed to protect the government, which is virtually encircled by Islamist fighters in Baidoa, halfway between Mogadishu and the Ethiopian border.

A government spokesman said the administration approved of the Ethiopian use of air power. The government also said it had closed all borders—a largely symbolic measure given that it has little power beyond Baidoa.

Ethiopia said it had attacked the capital's airport to stop "illegal flights" following the closure of Somalia's borders.

"It was also reported some of the extremists were waiting for an airlift out of Mogadishu," an Ethiopian spokesman said.

Aid agencies, struggling to get help to more than a million Somalis afflicted by conflict and weeks of floods in one of the world's poorest countries, said they had not been told about the closure of borders.

The Islamists accused Ethiopia of targeting civilians and repeated a threat to attack its capital. "We shall strike Addis Ababa the way they hit Mogadishu," Somalia Islamic Courts Council spokesman Abdirahman Ali Mudey said. "These airstrikes will not continue ... even if it means getting weapons from outside."

Government Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi told Reuters 8,000 foreign fighters had poured into Somalia to back the Somalia Islamic Courts Council. He agreed with a recent U.S. accusation that the movement's top ranks were controlled by al Qaeda.

Both sides say they have killed hundreds of opponents in days of battles with mortars, rockets, machine guns and tanks, but there has been no independent verification.

Residents said Ethiopian troops took control of Baladwayne town on Monday after a day of bombing to uproot the Islamists.

Ethiopian forces also encircled the towns of Dinsoor and Buur Hakaba, an Ethiopian military spokesman told Ethiopian television late Monday. In nearby Baidoa, locals saw Ethiopian military trucks ferrying wounded troops to the airport.

"I can see seven big trucks carrying wounded Ethiopian soldiers lying on blood-stained mattresses," taxi driver Abdullahi Hassan told Reuters by telephone.

The Islamists claim broad popular support and say their main aim is to restore order to Somalia under sharia law after years of anarchy since the 1991 ouster of dictator Siad Barre.

Addis Ababa fears a hard-line Muslim state on its doorstep and accuses the Somalia Islamic Courts Council of wanting to annex Ethiopia's ethnically Somali Ogaden region.