

26 December 2006

## **Islamic Forces Retreat in Somalia**

By The Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Somalia government and Ethiopian troops advanced toward the country's capital Tuesday as Islamic fighters retreated, bloodied by a week of artillery and mortar attacks but promising a "new phase" in the war—a chilling pronouncement from a movement that has threatened suicide attacks.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said he had been given unconfirmed reports that as many as 1,000 people had died and 3,000 were wounded.

"Some of them are Somalis, but a very significant proportion of them are not Somalis," Meles told reporters in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, referring to foreign Islamic radicals who have reportedly joined the fighting.

Meles said his forces, which entered Somalia in large numbers Saturday, have completed about half their mission.

"As soon as we have accomplished our mission—and about half of our mission is done, and the rest shouldn't take long—we'll be out," Meles said. He said there are only 3,000-4,000 Ethiopian troops in Somalia—"but no more."

Ethiopia sent fighter jets across the border Sunday to help Somalia's U.N.-recognized government push back the Islamists. Ethiopia bombed the country's two main airports and helped government forces capture several villages.

Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, a senior leader of the Islamic group, said he asked his troops to tactically retreat in the face of superior Ethiopian firepower.

"The war is entering a new phase," Ahmed said from Mogadishu. "We will fight Ethiopia for a long, long time and we expect the war to go everywhere."

Ahmed declined to elaborate, but some Islamic leaders have threatened a guerrilla war to include suicide bombings in Addis Ababa. He also accused Ethiopian troops of massacring 50 civilians in the central town of Cadado.

While the Islamic militias may be in retreat now, it is unclear whether they will regroup for a counterattack, or switch to hit-and-run tactics the government and Ethiopian troops will have difficulty defending against.

Government forces have been training seriously for battle for the past five months, and will be able to defeat the Islamists even after Ethiopia retreats, Foreign Minister Ismael Mohamoud Hurreh said.

"We will hold our line very, very well, don't worry about that," Hurreh told reporters in Nairobi, Kenya.

Meles has privately threatened for months to send troops into Somalia to fight terrorists, defend Ethiopian interests and prop up the besieged government, which has a very small military force.

He has also said he aims to severely damage the courts' military capabilities and allow both sides to return to peace talks on an even footing, but would not send troops into Mogadishu. Instead, he said, Somali forces would encircle the city to contain the Islamists.

"The rank and file of the Islamic Courts militia is not a threat to Ethiopia," Meles said Tuesday. "Once they return to their bases, we will leave them alone."

If he sticks to his plan, the transitional government and the Islamic courts would take peace talks more seriously because neither side would have the upper hand militarily.

Any attempt by the government or Ethiopia to enter Mogadishu would likely end in a disaster similar to the U.S. intervention to create a Somali government in 1992. That U.N.-sponsored mission ended in 1993, when militiamen shot down a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter and 18 servicemen were killed in a subsequent battle made famous in the book and movie "Black Hawk Down."

What is unclear is how clan politics, which have traditionally dominated Somali society, will shift with the Islamic movement's changing fortunes. Clan elders tend to take the victor's side in the interest of minimizing violence in their villages. The 11 courts that make up the Islamic council are based on clan, vary widely in their interpretation of Islamic law and do not always get along.

Hurreh said Somalis will welcome his government's attempts to do away with the Islamists and their often severe interpretation of the Quran.

"A lot of people in Mogadishu will be very happy to chew some qat and have the Islamic courts out of their way," he said, referring to the narcotic leaf that is popular in Somalia -- but banned by many of the Islamic courts.

Somalia's transitional government, which has been trying to assert itself for two years, promised the Islamists amnesty on Tuesday if they lay down their weapons and stop opposing the government.

"We call for the Islamic courts militia to surrender to the government before they are punished by the government," the administration's spokesman, Abdirahman Dinari, said Tuesday from the government seat in Baidoa.

Somalia has not had an effective government since warlords overthrew longtime dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991, pushing the country into anarchy. Two years ago, the United Nations helped set up an interim government for the arid, impoverished nation on the Horn of Africa.

Until now, the leadership has not been able to extend its influence outside Baidoa, where it is headquartered about 140 miles (225 kilometers) northwest of Mogadishu. The country was largely under the control of warlords until June, when the Islamic militia movement seized control of the capital and much of southern Somalia.

The U.S. government says four al QED leaders, believed to be behind the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, have become leaders in the Islamic militia.

The African Union, Arab League and a regional group known as IGAD were to discuss Somalia at a meeting Wednesday.

Many Somalis are enraged by the idea of Ethiopian involvement because the countries have fought two wars over their disputed border in the past 45 years. Islamic leaders have repeatedly said they want to incorporate ethnic Somalis living in eastern Ethiopia, northeastern Kenya and Djibouti into a Greater Somalia.

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