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## **Somali Clan Leaders May Help Fight Islamists**

By The Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Clan leaders in Somalia's capital are considering supporting government forces that are poised to clash with Islamic forces.

Mogadishu, an Islamist held city, was buzzing with news of government soldiers approaching the city.

Islamic movement fighters in northern Mogadishu were spotted changing out of their uniforms into civilian clothes.

Women selling qat—the popular leafy stimulant banned by the Islamists—were crowding the streets.

The Council of Islamic Courts, the umbrella body for the Islamic movement, captured Mogadishu in June and went on to take much of southern Somalia, often without fighting.

Its fortunes started to reverse Sunday, when Ethiopia sent reinforcements across the border to help the internationally recognized government.

On Wednesday, Ethiopian and Somali government troops drove Islamic fighters out of Jowhar, the last major town on the northern road to Mogadishu.

Residents of Mogadishu who are close to key elders said Abgal clan leaders were considering whether to continue supporting the Islamic movement.

Among their concerns was the potential misery a battle for the capital could bring.

The residents discussed the issue on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution from Islamic militias, who want to rule Somalia by the Quran.

Government spokesman Abdirahman Dinari also said talks for the peaceful surrender of Mogadishu were under way.

"Elders, scholars and civil society members have contacted us and they told us that they don't need bombardment or attack. They said they will welcome us without a fighting," Dinari said.

"We will not attack Mogadishu ... Islamic courts militias are already on the run and we hope that Mogadishu will fall to our hands without firing a shot."

Also Wednesday, officials in Baidoa, the seat of the government, presented to journalists more than a dozen soldiers who they said were captured Islamic fighters.

Mohamed Hussein Mohamed, 15, said he was conscripted into the war.

"I was in school before the war, but the Islamic courts forced me into their army," he said.

At the Bay General Hospital in Baidoa, two doctors and 20 nurses attended to 42 seriously wounded government soldiers and Islamic fighters.

"All I remember is an explosion and then I fell unconscious, only to wake up in pain with my friends lying nearby dead," said Yusuf Ali Geesey, 34.

The U.N. refugee agency said Wednesday it was "particularly concerned about reports of civilians, including children, being forcibly recruited to join the fighting."

And the conflict is not over yet. If the clan elders decide the government's success is inevitable, they will change sides and their clan members will feel obligated to follow.

That would leave the Islamic leaders, who have tried to cut across clan lines, isolated. Many of their militiamen would likely desert to rejoin their clans, and clan fighting could erupt.

Somalia's complex clan system has been the basis of politics and identity here for centuries.

But due to clan fighting, the country has not had an effective government since 1991, when clan-based warlords overthrew a dictator and then turned on one another.

Two years ago, the United Nations helped set up the interim government.

But it has been unable to assert much authority, in part because it has been weakened by clan rivalries.

The competition for control of Mogadishu since 1991 has involved the Abgal and Habr Gadir clans, who came together earlier this year to support the Islamic council.

If Abgal elders switch allegiance to the government, probably in return for key government posts, urban warfare between the Abgal and Habr Gadir clans would surely resume.

The leaders of the Abgal clan, who are seen as moderates, were expected to meet on Thursday.

The government, which only weeks ago could barely assert its power outside of one town, has made major military advances since Sunday with the backing of Ethiopia.

When troops entered Jowhar on Wednesday, an independent radio station began blasting Western music, which the Islamists had banned.

That was an indication of resentment of the strict form of Islam imposed by extremists in the Islamic movement, even as some Somalis have welcomed the order the movement has brought.

Similar mixed sentiment may be found in Mogadishu.

In Mogadishu, taxi driver Hussein Mudde said he hopes his livelihood will improve if the government pushes into the capital.

"Since the Islamic courts have taken control, people are walking instead of hiring a taxi," he said. "They don't have money because the Islamic courts closed the cinemas and music halls. Poets and artists and performers have been jobless."

Troops loyal to the government were getting closer to the capital.

Dinari said soldiers were heading toward the small village of Balad, about (30 kilometers) 18 miles from Mogadishu.

Balad resident Mohammed Abdi Hassan told The Associated Press by telephone that the Islamists had left and that no one was in control.

But Abdirahman Janaqow, deputy chairman of the Islamic courts' executive body, gave a radio address late Wednesday, vowing that "Islamic forces will be responsible for the security and defense of the capital."

And an Islamic movement official said his troops were simply entering a new phase in their battle.

"Our snakes of defense were let loose, now they are ready to bite the enemy everywhere in Somalia," said Sheik Mohamoud Ibrahim Suley.

He did not elaborate, but some Islamic leaders have threatened a guerrilla war to include suicide bombings in Addis Ababa.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has said he aims to severely damage the courts' military capabilities and allow both sides to return to peace talks on as equals.

He has said he would not send his troops into Mogadishu.

Meles said Tuesday he had been given unconfirmed reports that as many as 1,000 people had died and 3,000 were wounded since the fighting began on Saturday.

The Red Cross reported 850 people injured at hospitals supported by the relief agency in Mogadishu and Baidoa, but had no fatalities figures.

The conflict in Somalia has drawn concern in the United States, which accuses the Islamists of harboring al Qaeda terrorists, and other Western powers.

Alpha Oumar Konare, chairman of the African Union Commission, called Wednesday for "all parties in the conflict to end all hostilities" as well as the withdrawal of Ethiopia and other "foreign elements" from Somalia.

The latest violence in Somalia has sent hundreds of Somalis fleeing for safety every day in a country beset first by a drought that wiped out most of the country's crops and livestock in late 2005 and early 2006, then flooding since September that has destroyed tens of thousands of homes.

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