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Ethiopian Troops Take Key Town In Somalia

Forces Advance To Just 18 Miles From the Capital

By Stephanie McCrummen

LONDON— Ethiopian forces backing Somalia's interim government took control of the key Somali town of Jowhar on Wednesday and were on the verge of overrunning Balad, a village just 18 miles from the dusty, battered capital, Mogadishu.

With Ethiopian troops, tanks and helicopters closing in and military planes buzzing overhead, the situation in Mogadishu appeared confused, with witnesses reporting thousands of Somalis -- who have known little besides fighting for the past 15 years -- fleeing the capital, and those who remained unsure who might next control the city.

Militias loyal to Somalia's Islamic Courts movement, having retreated in recent days from most of the towns they had taken earlier this year, were spotted Wednesday shedding uniforms and fleeing the capital they have controlled since the summer, while other witnesses reported young men signing up with Islamic militias at several mosques around the city.

Islamic leaders have said the war is entering a new phase, and on Wednesday, Mohamoud Ibrahim Suley, a movement official in Mogadishu, told the Associated Press that "our snakes of defense were let loose, now they are ready to bite the enemy everywhere in Somalia."

Regional analysts have said the Islamic Courts militias, vastly outgunned by Ethiopian soldiers in conventional military terms, were counting on waging a guerrilla war.

"On one level you could say they've been beaten by the Ethiopians and they're trying to spin it," said Matt Bryden, a consultant in Nairobi with the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based policy research group. "On the other hand, you could say this is what they expected and of course they now go into a guerrilla war, and we get into an intractable, unwinnable conflict."

Abdirahman Dinari, a spokesman for the interim government, which has been holed up in the town of Baidoa, said officials of the U.N.-backed body could enter Mogadishu in the next day or two. The fragile government, cobbled together by regional negotiators two years ago, was initially based in Nairobi.

"Mogadishu is our capital," Dinari said. "So the government wants to consult religious moderates and other civil society activists on how we can make a strategy together that will solve our problems."

It was unclear whether Ethiopian troops would enter Mogadishu or simply surround it in an attempt to isolate the Islamic Courts fighters.

A draft U.N. Security Council statement calling for a cease-fire remained stalled, while African Union officials asked for a meeting of regional leaders in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, and called on Ethiopian forces to withdraw.

On Tuesday, however, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said that his campaign was only halfway completed and that he planned to clear out all the "extremists" from Mogadishu.

Experts have said that any large-scale invasion of Mogadishu by Ethiopian troops could end in a bloodbath.

Somalia has been without a functioning government since 1991, when President Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown. In the next two years, tens of thousands of foreign troops were unable to subdue the chaotic city controlled by rival clans, and in October 1993, 18 American soldiers were killed in a failed raid to capture a fugitive warlord, an operation that led to the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Though the United States has for the most part remained in the background as the current situation has deteriorated, Somalia has historically been considered strategically important because of its position adjacent to Red Sea shipping lanes.

More recently, it has drawn attention because of fears that the country could become a base for terrorist groups.

In the past, some Islamic Courts leaders have expressed a desire to create a "greater Somalia" that would include ethnic Somali portions of Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti; Ethiopia and Somalia have fought several times over Ethiopia's Ogaden region, including a full-scale war in the 1970s.

The United States and Ethiopia have accused the Islamic Courts movement of harboring terrorists, and the U.S. State Department went further this month, saying the movement was now controlled by an al-Qaeda cell, a claim that regional experts believe is exaggerated and fed in part by questionable intelligence from Ethiopia.

As the fighting continued Wednesday, an already dire humanitarian situation in Somalia appeared to worsen. Somalis who had already suffered severe droughts and floods fled the fighting in huge numbers, U.N. officials said, with thousands leaving Mogadishu and surrounding areas.

Officials with the International Committee of the Red Cross said the number of wounded had surpassed 800; Dinari said Ethiopian and interim government troops had killed more than 1,000 Islamic fighters, although aid groups could not confirm that figure.

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