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Islamic Movement Troops Abandon Mogadishu

By Craig Timberg

JOHANNESBURG — Troops from the Islamic movement that has ruled Somalia's capital Mogadishu for the past six months abandoned it on Thursday ahead of advancing Ethiopian forces, clearing the way for a unified, secular government to take control of the troubled oceanside city for the first time since 1991.

The collapse of the Islamic Courts Union's militias, which for much of the year had moved from triumph to triumph across southern Somalia using little more than pickup trucks mounted with machine guns, came just days after Ethiopia turned its powerful, modern military against it. The main offensive, including bombing raids by jet fighters, started Sunday.

Islamic leaders have vowed to continue fighting, and many analysts predict that Ethiopia's swift victory could rapidly deteriorate into a prolonged guerrilla war. The two nations are historic enemies that fought a bitter border war in 1977 and 1978.

Mogadishu's deeply fractured clan leaders were meeting Thursday to prepare for the arrival of a transitional government created with the help of a coalition of foreign governments, including Ethiopia, in 2004. It is supported by the United Nations.

"We are in Mogadishu," Ali Gedi, prime minister of the transitional government, said after the meeting there with clan leaders. "We are coordinating our forces to take control of Mogadishu."

Only last week, Gedi's government controlled the single town of Baidoa surrounded by increasingly aggressive Islamic forces. But on Thursday, the Islamic Courts Union fled Mogadishu so abruptly that they left many of their weapons behind, said a leader of the group, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.

"We don't want to see Mogadishu destroyed," Ahmed said in an interview televised on Al Jazeera.

Somalia's last national government, headed by Mohammed Siad Barre, fell in 1991 to the armies of rebel warlords. Those leaders then turned their forces on each other, keeping the city in a nearly constant state of lawlessness and mayhem for 15 years.

The Islamic Courts Union, which had its roots in clan-based neighborhood courts based on Islamic law, took control of the city in June. And though they were initially welcomed by many Somalis grateful for the return of order, harsh new rules governing personal conduct made many in Mogadishu uneasy.

Reports from Mogadishu said that mayhem broke out as the Islamic forces departed. Guns appeared on the streets, and makeshift militias restored once-common roadblocks around the city. "The city is basically lawless," said Omar Jamal, executive director of Somali Justice Advocacy Center, speaking from his office in St. Paul, Minn. "Somalis everywhere are hoping this is not descending to anarchy."

Yemeni authorities opened fire on boats filled with refugees fleeing the fighting, and at least 17 people drowned in the Gulf of Aden when one of the vessels capsized, the Associated Press reported, citing the United Nations refugee agency. About 140 people were missing, the Geneva-based agency said.

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