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Somali Prime Minister Promises Peace Soon

Gedi's Return to Mogadishu Cheered, But Protesters Jeer Ethiopian Troops

By Stephanie McCrummen

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — With Ethiopian tanks and soldiers guarding key sites in the exhausted Somali capital of Mogadishu, the country's long-exiled and long-powerless prime minister rolled into town Friday, promising that his government would establish order across the chaotic Horn of Africa nation in a matter of months.

Hundreds of Somalis cheered the arrival of Ali Mohamed Gedi—they waved his photo and the pale blue Somali flag, witnesses said. Some expressed relief that the rival Islamic Courts movement and the strict social rules it had enforced since June were gone.

"We were fighting for our political survival. But with the will and the support of the people, we are the winners," Gedi told reporters. "We are here to start our work."

Elsewhere in the city, crowds of protesters jeered, burned tires and brush and threw rocks at Ethiopian tanks, raising the question of how long Gedi's weak interim government can afford the protection of soldiers from a country that most Somalis consider an enemy or a proxy for the United States.

Still, most streets were calm after a day of looting and mayhem Thursday as the city changed hands. The question of what might come next lingered. Some Somalis noted that warlords who had terrorized people with extortion and thuggery before the Islamic Courts movement took over seemed to be reemerging in several towns outside Mogadishu.

"My own feeling depends on what the situation will be after a few days when I know the agenda of the government, and the clear picture of what the Ethiopians will be doing in the three weeks coming," said Mohamed Ibrahim, executive director of Somali Youth for Peace and Democracy, a private group in Mogadishu. "In the six months that the Islamic Courts were in power, it was very good in terms of security. But now, some warlords are getting power again. It's like square one."

Ibrahim also expressed doubts about how the new government would fare in appeasing the vast number of rival clans, sub-clans and sub-sub-clans whose fighting has kept Somalia without a central government since 1991, when a coalition of warlords overthrew President Mohamed Siad Barre.

Ibrahim said that Gedi, who has spent stretches of time outside Somalia, had already made a significant mistake in not reaching out in a substantial way to one of the most important clans in Mogadishu, the Habargidir, who are heavily armed and well financed and collaborated closely with the Islamic Courts movement.

"They are very patient, very pragmatic people," Ibrahim said. "If you understand their power, if you understand the game, then it's fine. If they are not understood, if they are not respected, they will challenge him."

As the last of the Islamic fighters slipped back into civilian life or fled down the Indian Ocean coast, many Somalis reveled for the moment in the restoration of simple freedoms that had been curtailed in some areas when the Islamic movement took power. By Friday night, several movie theaters had reopened in the oceanside city, where countless buildings bear the scars of years of clan warfare. Some people resumed chewing the narcotic leaf khat, a favorite indulgence that had been frowned upon by the movement.

"Now I can do anything I want," said Abdirisack Norifitin, 23, an English teacher in Mogadishu who had favored traditional dress when the Islamic Courts movement held power but on Friday pulled on his jeans and vowed to grow out his hair. "We're going to have peace. We're going to have stability in the future. This is a big opportunity for us."

Somalia's stability has historically been considered strategically important to the United States because of the country's location near the Middle East and Red Sea shipping lanes, and lately because of fears that the Islamic Courts could harbor terrorist groups.

Some regional analysts have said that the alleged links between Islamic Court leaders and al-Qaeda were exaggerated, however. And opposition leaders in Ethiopia have said that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who had accused the movement of supporting secessionist guerrilla groups inside Ethiopia, had played up the terrorist angle to win U.S. backing for military action in Somalia.

Some analysts said that the Islamic militias' rapid retreat in the face of the Ethiopian offensive suggests that they were never the threat they were made out to be; others believe the Islamic fighters have faded back to wage a protracted guerrilla war, a scenario that has always been the most feared among regional leaders.

The Islamic Courts movement was founded in the 1990s as a collection of clan-based courts imposing Islamic law. It was broadly welcomed among Mogadishu's residents when its militias took control of the capital in June.

On Friday, a spokesman for the transitional government, Abdirahman Nur, said that Ethiopian troops were expected to remain in Somalia until they have ferreted out the "extremist" elements within the movement. Meles said his troops would pursue the "international jihadists" down the coast.

"We need to pursue those elements to make sure they don't establish themselves again and destabilize Somalia and the region," said Meles, who had accused the movement of getting support from Ethiopia's bitter enemy, Eritrea, among other countries. "In addition, we have to help the transitional government stabilize the situation in Mogadishu. But I expect that mission to be completed very soon."

The Reuters news agency reported that Ethiopian jets buzzed the town of Jilib, 65 miles north of Kismaayo port, which is still held by the Islamic movement.

In the capital, Ethiopian troops moved quickly to take control of Mogadishu's main airport, closed for years by clan-on-clan fighting, and the city's seaport.

Besides the anger that many Somalis expressed at the presence of Ethiopian troops in their city, there was the sheer oddity of seeing a storied enemy in their midst. Somalia and Ethiopia have fought border skirmishes for decades and one full-scale war in 1977 and 1978.

Ibrahim admitted to staring at the Ethiopian soldiers as they rumbled by in tanks and trucks, and wondering what they must think about being inside Somalia. He watched them eat mangos and bananas. He watched them smiling and watched other passersby shouting at them.

"But the soldier wouldn't understand, and so a translator would have to explain," Ibrahim said. "Some were very suspicious."

Norifitin, the teacher, joined hundreds of people who ventured across the city to see what an Ethiopian occupation looked like. He went to the old, falling-down U.S. Embassy compound, which government and Ethiopian troops had taken over. The buildings were crumbling, the lot overgrown with weeds and trees.

Shiikha Mohamed decided, however, it was best to lock himself inside his home until things felt a bit more certain.

"We're sitting in the house only," he said by telephone from his Mogadishu neighborhood. "The future is not good. The Ethiopian army is too much inside of Mogadishu, and I don't know what they're doing."

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