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## **Further Combat Looms in Somalia**

By Stephanie McCrummen

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — Somali government troops heavily backed by Ethiopian tanks and soldiers pushed Saturday toward Somalia's port city of Kismaayo, the last stronghold of the Islamic Courts movement swept from power in recent days.

A major battle between the two sides seemed imminent, as Ethiopian jets blew over towns near Kismaayo, and leaders of the Islamic movement rallied fighters who had retreated to the area in the face of Ethiopia's vastly superior military force.

The Islamic Courts movement is "ready to fight against the enemy of Allah," Sharif Ahmed, a leader of the group, told residents of Kismaayo, according to the Associated Press.

Somalis are growing impatient with the presence of thousands of Ethiopian troops in their country, but Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who has backed the interim Somali government now in power, has said his military will not pull out until it has captured the most "extremist" leaders and "international jihadists" within the Courts movement.

Meles has accused those leaders of supporting ethnic Somali separatist groups in Ethiopia, and both the United States and Ethiopia have accused the Islamic Courts fighters of sheltering terrorists, an allegation the movement has called propaganda.

The United States has denied giving Ethiopia the green light to invade Somalia but has steadfastly supported Ethiopia's right to self-defense, and Meles has characterized this war as defensive, not preemptive. Just days before the Ethiopian action, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Jendayi E. Frazer, accused the Islamic group of being "controlled" by an al-Qaeda cell, an allegation that regional analysts say was exaggerated and intended to justify Ethiopia's incursion.

The U.S. government, which has a substantial military presence up the coast in Djibouti, has said that four suspects in the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania could be among the 2,000 or so fighters who retreated in recent days to the Kismaayo area, which includes a vast forest ideal for hiding in and staging a guerrilla war.

The Islamic Courts movement came to power in June with the popular support of Somalis tired of the brutish rule of warlords who called themselves an "anti-terrorism coalition" and received financial backing from the CIA.

Somalis tend to adhere to a moderate version of Islam, and for many, supporting a movement that enforced Islamic law with varying degrees of severity was a pragmatic choice rather than a religious one.

It is perhaps a measure of that pragmatism that as the government asserted control of Mogadishu, the capital, on Friday, many of the Islamic fighters simply slipped off their uniforms, shaved their beards and went back to regular life, witnesses said.

Hundreds of Somalis greeted the formerly exiled Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi, seemingly willing to give the secular government a chance if it means restoring order to their country, which has not had a central government since the warlords overthrew President Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991.

Elsewhere in the city Friday, hundreds of Somalis protested against Ethiopian troops in Mogadishu. The rallies continued on a smaller scale Saturday, witnesses said.

More than religious fervor, Somalis seem motivated by nationalism. Analysts say the presence of the Ethiopian troops could jeopardize the government, which was cobbled together by negotiators in Kenya nearly two years ago and has struggled against its image as a group of outsiders.

"If it happens that the Islamic extremists win out, I think moderate Somalis will be supportive under the banner of Somali nationalism, not religious extremism," said David Shinn, a former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia.

By Saturday, Ethiopian and Somali government troops had reached the town of Jilib, about 80 miles north of Kismaayo, and were pushing ahead, according to Somalia's ambassador to Ethiopia, Abdikarin Farah. "Obviously," he said, "they are advancing."

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