



Clashes in N. Mali Kill 20

Posted Wednesday, June 27th, 2012

Witnesses in northern Mali say at least 20 people were killed Wednesday in clashes between Islamist militants and rebels fighting for a separate Tuareg state in the region.

A VOA reporter said the al-Qaida-linked group MUJAO (The Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa) seized control of a key city of Gao from the separatist group MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) after exchanging heavy weapons fire throughout the day. He said the exact toll was not immediately clear as many were injured, among them civilians. He said after the separatist rebels were driven out of Gao, life resumed its course, with shops opening and traders returning to their places in the market.

The MNLA and the Islamist militant group Ansar Dine seized control of northern Mali earlier this year. Both groups are made up of Tuareg tribesmen from different various clans. But while the MNLA wants an independent Tuareg state named Azawad in Northern Mali, the Islamist militants say they want a unified state of Mali governed by sharia law. The two sides have clashed in recent weeks.

In the capital Bamako Wednesday, refugees from northern Mali protested for a second straight day outside the prime minister's office calling for government intervention in the north.

Hundreds gathered for a sit-in, chanting "Free the North" and "Send the army to the North."

The Malian army is struggling to reorganize after a coup in March of this year.

Since then, an interim government has taken control and is working to organize new elections. The Tuareg groups have used the unrest in the capital to seize control of the north.

Leaders of the regional group of states ECOWAS said they will not tolerate the situation and have offered troops to help Mali's government quell the rebellion in the north.