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Ethiopia Steps Up Attacks on Somalia

Planes Strike Airport; Refugees Flee to Kenya

By Stephanie McCrummen and William Branigin

LONDON — Ethiopian troops fought their way closer to the Somali capital of Mogidishu on Tuesday, pushing back militiamen loyal to a radical Islamic movement that until now has controlled much of the country and that has vowed to wage a guerrilla war lasting "years and years and years."

Aid workers said the number of injured had surpassed 800, as thousands of civilians battered by drought, floods and now by rockets and mortars continued to flee villages in droves.

Fighting was reported on three fronts Tuesday in the intensifying war, which was marked by a third day of Ethiopian airstrikes and reports of mounting casualties.

United Nations officials warned of a dire humanitarian crisis inside Somalia, while fears remained high that Ethiopia's campaign could have disastrous consequences across the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said Tuesday that a force of 3,000 to 4,000 Ethiopian troops had "broken the back" of the Islamic Courts militias, forcing them into a full withdrawal. A spokesman for the country's internationally-recognized interim government, which Ethiopia has protected as a buffer against the Islamic Courts movement, told Islamic forces to surrender and offered them amnesty.

As the Ethiopian troops pushed ahead, however, the Islamic Courts fighters seemed to withdraw almost simultaneously from their front-line positions, suggesting a coordinated strategy rather than a chaotic retreat, analysts said.

It was unclear where exactly the Islamic fighters went. Witnesses said some were spotted with their battle wagons around Mogidishu, while analysts said it was likely most headed into the bush to prepare for a war on their own terms.

Islamic Courts leader Sharif Sheikh Ahmed said Tuesday that the war had entered "a new phase," and once again condemned the international community for doing little to prevent the Ethiopian attack.

Meles said his forces were halfway to crushing the Islamic Courts forces after killing more than 1,000 of its fighters and wounding nearly 3,000. There was no independent confirmation of the casualty figures.

Leaders of the Islamic Courts, which seized Mogadishu in June, acknowledged the retreat, but insisted that it was a tactic in what would be a long war and expanding war. They hinted that they could take the fight beyond Somalia's borders, possibly by sending suicide bombers to Addis Ababa.

With the conflict escalating, the U.N. Security Council scheduled an emergency meeting in New York to receive a briefing from Francois Lonseny Fall, a former prime minister and foreign minister of Guinea, who is the U.N. special envoy for Somalia.

In a news conference in Addis Ababa, Meles said, "We have already completed half our mission, and as soon as we finish the second half, our troops will leave Somalia," Reuters news agency reported. "We will not keep a single fighter in Somalia once our mission of getting rid of the terrorists is completed."

The Ethiopian prime minister said the main targets of his forces now were Eritrean troops and foreign Islamic radicals who have sided with the Islamic Courts movement.

"I find it perplexing what the Ethiopians are up to," said David Shinn, a former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia. "Over the long term, I don't see where this gets them. . . . And one wonders how long they can hang on in this situation, because eventually it's going to turn into a nasty guerrilla war, and I don't think the Ethiopians have the stomach to carry on with that kind of campaign."

While it was unclear whether the Ethiopians were preparing to push into Mogidishu or simply surround it, Shinn and others noted that a force of 15,000 troops failed to subdue the warring capital in 1993, when 18 American troops were killed in an incident depicted in the book and film "Black Hawk Down."

Meles said Ethiopian troops would not enter Mogadishu but would encircle the Somali capital to contain the Islamic Courts forces, the Associated Press reported.

A spokesman for the Islamic Courts Council, Abdi Kafi, said in Mogadishu that any attempt to capture the city would lead to "destruction and doomsday" for the Ethiopians, Reuters reported. He warned it was only a matter of time "before we we start striking at them from all directions."

Ahmed, who heads the Islamic Courts executive body, said the group ordered its fighters to withdraw from some areas.

"The war is entering a new phase," Ahmed said, according to AP. "We will fight Ethiopia for a long, long time, and we expect the war to go everyplace." He would not elaborate, but some Islamic leaders have threatened wage guerrilla war inside Ethiopia, including suicide bombings in Addis Ababa.

The Ethiopian military openly intervened in Somalia Sunday after quietly helping the Somalia government for weeks as it resisted advances by the militiamen from its base in

Baidoa in the south-central part of the country. The interim government receiving backing from the United States as well as Ethiopia, but its forces had been gradually losing ground to the Islamic Courts fighters, who are said to have the support of the al-Qaeda terrorist network in addition to Eritrea. Formerly a part of Ethiopia, Eritrea formally gained independence in 1993 after a 30-year-war with Ethiopia, and the two countries have remained at odds since.

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