

Somalia fighting kills at least five, journalist shot dead

By Abdi Sheikh



(Editing by George Obulutsa)

MOGADISHU (Reuters) - At least five people were killed when a shell hit the minibus they were using to flee fighting in a town north west of the capital, as African Union and government soldiers intensify their fight against al Shabaab militants.

Earlier this week, African Union and Somali government troops stepped up their attacks on al Shabaab militants in Mogadishu's northern outskirts, forcing hundreds of families to flee their makeshift homes and head for the city centre.

An official in Mogadishu said those killed were hit by a shell in their van as they fled Lafole, 21 km (13 miles) northwest of Mogadishu, while nine others were wounded.

"A shell landed on a mini-bus fleeing from Lafole. Five died and nine others were wounded today," Ali Musa, coordinator of ambulance services, told Reuters.

It was not clear who fired the shell.

The AU force, which already controls most of the capital, is trying to push its way through the Afgoye corridor, once a rural area northwest of Mogadishu but now home to hundreds of thousands of Somalis uprooted from their homes.

A spokesman for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) said their forces were on the outskirts of Afgoye, but were holding off attacking to avoid civilian casualties and destroying property. He added that seven of their soldiers were wounded in fighting on Wednesday and Thursday.

"We met resistance at our base in Arbiska (22 km to the north east of Mogadishu). We will not be lured to fight among the civilians - we chased al Shabaab," Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Ankunda told Reuters.

Residents said they saw AU and Somali government troops at Baar Ismail at the entrance of Afgoye - a strategic junction at the edge of the town.

They said hundreds of people had fled from Afgoye, Elasha and Lafole towns for a third day, while al Shabaab also fled to remote southern towns apart from a few fighters who remained to fight.

The Afgoye corridor, thought to house the largest concentration of internally displaced people in the world, stretches some 30 km northwest of Mogadishu to the al Shabaab stronghold of Afgoye.

The African Union has said that by securing the Afgoye corridor it would give some 400,000 people access to aid.

Al Shabaab has waged a bloody five-year insurgency to remove Somalia's Western-backed government and impose its harsh interpretation of sharia, Islamic law, on a country that has had no central government for the last two decades .

It still controls swathes of central and southern Somalia but is being gradually squeezed out of its strongholds by Kenyan and Ethiopian troops who have launched their own incursions into Somalia, and is being pushed out of Mogadishu by AU forces.

Underscoring the violence prevailing in the country, unidentified gunmen shot and killed Ahmed Addow Anshur, a producer and reporter for the Mogadishu-based Radio Shabelle, on Thursday, his colleague Mohamed Bashir said, adding that he too had received text message threats.

"He is the third Shabelle radio reporter killed in the same district this year. We are really in grief for losing him," Bashir told Reuters.

The killing was condemned by the National Union of Somali Journalists, and by Augustine Mahiga, Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for Somalia.

"It is well known that Somali journalists have the most difficult working conditions in the world. But that does not make it any easier to accept when one is brutally killed," Mahiga said in a statement.

"This cycle of violence must stop."

The union said that Anshur's killing brought the number of journalists killed in Somalia this year to six. The country is ranked the most dangerous in Africa for journalists by media rights group Reporters Without Borders.

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