

UPDATE 2-African Union troops say seize key Somali town

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- * Rebel defeat to open up food corridor, AU troops say
- * Al Shabaab says made strategic retreat from Afgoye
- * Mogadishu still vulnerable to attacks
- * Rebels still hold parts of southern Somalia (Adds Shabaab reaction, U.N., analyst quote)

By Abdi Sheikh

MOGADISHU, May 25 (Reuters) - African Union troops on Friday seized a rebel stronghold near Mogadishu from al Qaeda-linked insurgents, marking a major blow against the al Shabaab rebels who have used the town to stage sporadic attacks on the capital.

The capture of Afgoye by the AU force AMISOM and Somali government troops, who already control most of Mogadishu, also paves the way to securing a corridor to the capital giving access to agencies providing humanitarian aid to displaced people.

Nevertheless, it still leaves the capital vulnerable to attacks because African Union and government troops have as yet been unable to dislodge the last of the rebels from areas just around Mogadishu.

"We are now fully controlling Afgoye town, Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Ankunda, AMISOM spokesman, told Reuters.

Al Shabaab confirmed the capture of the town by the AU forces on its website www.somalimemo.net, and said the Islamist withdrawal was tactical.

"Thousands of our enemies, AMISOM, with tanks, entered Afgoye town on Friday after three days of fighting," the website said. "They took the town without resistance. The mujahideen withdrew as part of our tactics."

Afgoye is a strategic junction town on the road leading from Mogadishu to the south of the Horn of Africa nation, about 30 km (20 miles) outside the capital.

"It is a significant blow for al Shabaab, that said al Shabaab is not a diminished force and having been in Mogadishu I can tell you they continue to infiltrate the city, continue to conduct assassinations and other asymmetric war tactics," Rasheed Abdi, an independent Horn of Africa analyst, said.

"They (AMISOM and Somali government troops) should not rest on their laurels, the struggle continues ... Mogadishu still remains vulnerable to these attacks."

Although al Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu last August, they have managed to launch devastating al Qaeda-style attacks in Mogadishu such as a suicide bombing on a ceremony at the national theatre last month.

The AU force began its advance on Tuesday, forcing hundreds of families to flee their makeshift homes in the Afgoye corridor, once a rural area northwest of Mogadishu but now home to hundreds of thousands of Somalis uprooted from their homes during years of chaotic fighting.

MORE ACCESS TO DISPLACED

The U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Friday about 6,200 people had been displaced following the fighting in Afgoye.

The African Union has said securing the Afgoye corridor, believed to be an area with the largest concentration of internally displaced people in the world, would give some 400,000 people access to aid.

The U.N. resident and humanitarian coordinator for Somalia said there seemed to be "little collateral damage to civilians", adding those displaced would have more access to humanitarian services.

"The level of service could change, some things were difficult to provide, particularly ... dealing with education. Health services were also limited," Mark Bowden told Reuters.

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

"However strategic Afgoye may be, even if Afgoye is taken I don't think that will be the end of the military challenge," Augustine Mahiga, special representative of the U.N. secretary general on Somalia, said earlier on Friday.

The Islamist militants, who control swathes of Somalia, are also fighting against Somali government and Kenyan troops in the rebel-controlled southern and central parts of the country.

Ethiopian forces have also crossed into Somalia to tackle the militants. (Additional reporting by Yara Bayoumy; Writing by James Macharia and Yara Bayoumy; Editing by Sophie Hares)