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## **Somali, Ethiopian Troops Take Islamist Stronghold**

By The Associated Press

KISMAYO, Somalia — Somali government troops backed by Ethiopian tanks and fighter jets captured the last major stronghold of a militant Islamic movement Monday, while hundreds of Islamic fighters were seen fleeing the city.

Hundreds of gunmen, who apparently deserted from the Islamic movement, began looting the warehouses where the Council of Islamic Courts had stored supplies, including weapons and ammunition.

Gangs skirmished in the streets and the southern coastal city was descending into chaos, businessman Sheik Musa Salad said.

"Everything is out of control, everyone has a gun and gangs are looting everything now that the Islamists have left," he said.

Well-armed troops drove into Kismayo after clearing roads laced with land mines that had been left by Islamic fighters fleeing a 13-day military onslaught by government troops backed by Ethiopian tanks and MiG fighter jets.

"We have entered and captured the city," Maj. Gen. Ahmed Musa told The Associated Press while riding aboard a truck into Kismayo, where an estimated 3,000 hardline Islamic fighters had vowed to make a last stand but melted away under artillery fire.

Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi offered amnesty to hundreds of Islamic fighters if they gave themselves up, but made no such offer to leaders of the group. He also ordered a countrywide disarmament that goes into effect Tuesday, an immense task in Somalia, which is awash with weapons after a 15-year civil war.

"The warlord era in Somalia is now over," Gedi said at a news conference in the recently captured capital, Mogadishu, giving a three-day deadline for the handover of all weapons.

Among those sought were three al Qaeda suspects wanted in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies who were being sheltered by the Islamic group. The government hoped to catch them before they slipped out of the country.

Government spokesman Abdirahman Dinari said the government had asked the United States to provide air and sea surveillance to prevent suspected extremists from escaping.

The Islamic forces have a base near the Kenyan border on a small peninsula called Ras Kamboni, where there is a pier and traditional oceangoing boats known as dhows.

Ethiopian MiG fighter jets flew low over the ocean looking for boats that might be carrying the escaping Islamic fighters.

Meanwhile, senior Western diplomats were pushing for the deployment of an African-led peacekeeping force in Somalia as soon as possible to help stabilize the country, said a U.S. government official on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak to the media.

Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki, in his New Year's message, called for an urgent summit of the east African regional body IGAD to discuss the Somali crisis.

The Islamic forces began to disintegrate after a night of artillery attacks at the front line and following a mutiny within its ranks, witnesses said.

Islamic leaders had vowed to make a stand against Ethiopia, which has one of the largest armies in Africa, or to begin an Iraq-style guerrilla war.

"Even if we are defeated we will start an insurgency," said Sheik Ahmed Mohamed Islan, the head of the Islamic movement in the Kismayo region. "We will kill every Somali that supports the government and Ethiopians."

Gedi said three al Qaeda suspects wanted in the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in east Africa that killed more than 250 people were hiding in Kismayo.

Somalia's interim government and its Ethiopian allies have long accused Islamic militias of harboring al Qaeda, and the U.S. government has said the 1998 bombers have become leaders in the Islamic movement in Africa.

"If we capture them alive we will hand them over to the United States," Gedi told the AP. "We know they are in Kismayo."

Islamic movement leaders deny having any links to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terror network.

But in a recorded message posted on the Internet Saturday, deputy al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on Somalia's Muslims and other Muslims worldwide to continue the fight against "infidels and crusaders."

Gedi accused al-Zawahiri of trying to destabilize Somalia and its neighbors.

In the past 10 days, the Islamic group has been forced from the capital, Mogadishu, and other key towns in the face of attacks led by Ethiopia.

The military advance marked a stunning turnaround for Somalia's government, which just weeks ago could barely control one town—its base of Baidoa—while the Council of Islamic Courts controlled the capital and much of southern Somalia.

The Council of Islamic Courts, the umbrella group for the Islamic movement that ruled Mogadishu for six months, wants to transform Somalia into a strict Islamic state.

Islamic officials said they still had fighters in the capital and were ready for warfare.

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