

**“Are you al-Shabaab or soldiers?”**  
**By Feisal Omar, Reuters**  
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At 11:30 on Sunday morning I was sipping a cup of coffee at the Village restaurant near the palace when I heard a blast followed by gunshots.



I walked out onto the street and could see pickup trucks with anti-aircraft guns mounted on them, rushing toward the Mogadishu court. I started my vehicle and drove speedily in the direction of the court. I arrived moments later at the court building where there was an intense exchange of gunfire.



I could not believe armed fighters had broken into the court, killed the soldiers that guarded it, the lawyers and others. "How did al-Shabaab take over such a well-guarded building in the heart of the town!" I whispered to myself as I got closer to the building.

Reuters and my family knew I was at the scene, calling me every second to confirm I was safe. Soldiers angrily glanced at me whenever my mobile phone rang. I had to silence them lest I should be mistaken for manning the explosions.



After a while, I followed soldiers battling at the gate with the fighters firing from the roof top. After about half an hour of fighting, a deafening blast shook the ground. It was a suicide bomber with his car bomb just outside the gate. I could not see the soldiers due to dust and thick clouds of smoke. I stepped backwards. The soldiers suspected one another – one seemed to be al-Shabaab to the others because the fighters were also in government uniforms. I was using my two cameras interchangeably, as if I had machine guns. Different questions popped into my mind. "When will a man in uniform blow up?" The whole place was a mess. I saw police beating a military man, mistaking him for al-Shabaab.

I will never forget the question I put to three men fighting beside me "Are you al-Shabaab or soldiers?" It was a shocking day but they chuckled and replied they were police. Still I could not trust any man in uniform as they could claim to be from any group – and I did not know their faces. Then the three men pointed their guns at other armed men in uniform approaching us "Hey stop, who are you? Go back!" They also pointed their guns at them and replied "We are security forces, and who are you?"



The government ordered Special Forces to take over the mission and shortly afterward security forces arrived in unique uniforms. I could see a girl holding her brother's hand, fleeing from the car bomb blast that exploded not far from their home.



This time I went in with the forces who were fighting more intensely as they entered the court. I could see some people on the court's roof top crying out to be rescued. The stairs were under the control of al-Shabaab and so some people had to jump to safety as a last resort.

Fighting began on the stairs – government forces were determined to save the people. A civilian threw himself from the fourth floor of the building and broke his legs.

The forces had to use ladders before all people threw themselves off the tall building. Some officials were rescued through the back door and others via the ladders leaned against adjacent walls. Minute after minute, attackers blew themselves up until the forces took over the building. More government troops lay siege to the scene. Ambulances and families with different cars soon gathered to pick up the casualties.



The whole court compound was slippery and stained with blood. Human flesh was littered everywhere. I wished it was only a film and not a real-life horror.

I counted more than a dozen dead but I grieved most when I was told the two lawyers that had defended my colleague in court were among the dead.

Photography by Feisal Omar

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