

Somali rebels ambush presidential convoy, no casualties

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* President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed unharmed in attack

* AU, Somali forces seized Afgoye corridor over weekend

MOGADISHU May 29 (Reuters) - Somalia's al Shabaab rebels ambushed an armoured convoy carrying the country's president during a rare overland trip outside the capital on Tuesday, a Reuters witness said.

President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed was unharmed in the attack which occurred on the outskirts of Elasha town, located between Mogadishu and the former rebel stronghold of Afgoye, about 30 km (18 miles) northwest of the city.

"The fighting split the convoy. Vehicles scattered in different directions," a Reuters photographer travelling with the convoy said.

Bullets struck several African Union (AU) peacekeeper vehicles but none were damaged.

The firefight lasted about 30 minutes and forced the AU to fire shells to subdue the attack, he said, adding that the armoured vehicle carrying Ahmed sped off as fighting broke out.

A spokesman for the AMISOM peacekeepers confirmed the ambush. "We disrupted it as soon as they fired small guns from afar," Lieutenant Colonel Paddy Ankunda told Reuters.

African Union and Somali government troops captured Afgoye on Friday and then secured an aid corridor linking the town to Mogadishu over the weekend, wresting control of a strip of land believed to hold around 400,000 people displaced by conflict.

Al Shabaab, which merged with al Qaeda earlier this year, said they had pulled out of the Afgoye corridor in a tactical retreat, but threatened on Monday to strike back.

"If the government controls the Afgoye corridor, then President Sharif should be able to pass there peacefully," Sheikh Abdiasis Abu Musab, al Shabaab's spokesman for military operations, told Reuters.

The U.N. refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Tuesday 14,000 people had been displaced by the recent military activity in the Afgoye corridor. (Reporting by Feisal Omar and Abdi Sheikh; Editing by Richard Lough)

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