

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

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# Islamists flee as AU, Somali troops seize rebel stronghold

Report — Agence France-Presse

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MOGADISHU, May 25, 2012 (AFP) - African Union and Somali troops have captured the strategic town of Afgoye from Al-Qaeda-linked Shebab insurgents, who mostly fled in advance of the assault, an AU army spokesman said Friday.

"We have crossed the River Shabelle and we are now there in Afgoye, we hold the town," spokesman Paddy Ankunda told AFP. "We have been fighting since Tuesday to achieve this objective and we have achieved it now."

Columns of AU and Somali troops backed by tanks launched the long-awaited attack on Afgoye four days ago, marching northwest 30 kilometres (18 miles) from the capital Mogadishu to the town, an area crowded with displaced people.

"The Shebab are fleeing the town, they are running away into the bush," said Ankunda, adding that AU troops had also secured the roads leading from Afgoye, which controls a key route from southern Somalia to the capital.

"There is some shooting here and there, but mostly it is calm... We control all the road junctions out of Afgoye," he said.

More than 400,000 people were living in the Afgoye region at the start of the year -- the world's largest concentration of displaced people -- according to the United Nations. Impoverished settlements of plastic and rag huts crowd the area.

The UN refugee agency reports over 6,000 civilians have fled since the assault on Afgoye began, although aid workers fear that more people not included in that assessment may have fled into the bush.

Officials hope that the capture of Afgoye will deny the Shebab a base from which to continue its recent spate of guerrilla attacks on the capital.

Many fighters had shifted to the area after pulling out of fixed positions in Mogadishu last August and launching a campaign of suicide and grenade attacks.

The capture of Afgoye is "a significant military breakthrough," said Augustine Mahiga, the UN special representative for Somalia.

"Afgoye... controls the exits and entrances to Mogadishu and it has been a military headquarters of the Shebab," he told reporters in the Kenyan capital.

Afgoye's capture will "neutralise the area of operation and preparation" of guerrilla attacks, Mahiga said, although noting that the more land AU and Somali troops seize, the more thinly spread the forces will be.

In a separate front, Somali troops were reported to be pushing northwards towards the Shebab-held town of Balad, which lies some 35 kilometres (21 miles) north of Mogadishu.

Balad controls a key bridge across the River Shabelle, and lies on the road to the important city of Jowhar.

The loss of Afgoye to the Shebab is another major blow for the group, who have been on the backfoot for several months.

AU and Somali troops have made significant gains in recent months against Shebab militants, although the Islamists remain a major security threat.

"There is still a big task to be done, however strategic Afgoye is... it is not the end," added Mahiga.

Somalia's weak and Western-backed transitional administration has less than three months to set up a permanent government, but the leaders have been riven by bitter internal divisions and tarnished by accusations of gross corruption.

The international community has expressed concern it is failing to meet key deadlines, but leaders this week committed themselves to choosing a new parliament by July 20, and a new president by August 20.