

Government in Somalia regains control of capital

AL-SHABAB RETREATS

Hopes of bringing aid to thousands of famine victims

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The New York Times

NAIROBI, Kenya — Al-Shabab Islamist rebels abruptly pulled out of Mogadishu, the bullet-ridden capital of Somalia, on Saturday, leaving the entire city in the hands of the government for the first time in years and raising hopes that aid groups could now deliver aid to more famine victims unfettered.

Witnesses described truckloads of heavily armed al-Shabab fighters driving away under the cover of darkness and beleaguered residents pouring into the streets to cheer and jeer their departure.

"We have been dreaming of this day for the last three years," said Abdullahi Mohamed Ali, Somalia's new, Harvard-educated prime minister.

Al-Shabab's notoriously brutal brand of Islamism has threatened Mogadishu residents for years, but more recently the rebels have also blocked international relief groups from bringing food to victims of the famine that has swept southern Somalia this summer, contributing to tens of thousands of deaths.

Aid groups hoped al-Shabab's retreat would allow them access to more than 100,000 famine victims who have come seeking aid. But al-Shabab still controls large parts of southern Somalia, the areas worst hit by drought and famine.

The rebels said Saturday that they had "completely vacated Mogadishu for tactical purposes," according to Ali

Mohammad Rage, an al-Shabab spokesman. He said that al-Shabab would change its strategy to "hit-and-run attacks."

"We will be back soon," he warned.

But in the past few months, al-Shabab, who have pledged allegiance to al-Qaida, have taken a beating in steady urban fighting against a better-armed, 9,000-strong African Union peacekeeping force. Many analysts have said al-Shabab was growing weaker by the day.

Al-Shabab has imposed a brutal reign in areas it controlled, chopping off the hands of petty thieves, lashing women for showing their ankles and beheading anyone deemed a spy. They also banned music, television, gold teeth and even bras, branding them all un-Islamic.

The rebels have been divided over whether to let in Western aid organizations to relieve the famine. There are indications, too, that they are running out of cash.

Al-Shabab has prevented most Western aid groups from bringing lifesaving help to the rural areas of southern Somalia it still controls. Al-Shabab are also blocking starving people from leaving their territory; al-Shabab fighters have set up their own large displaced persons camp about 25 miles from Mogadishu where they are essentially imprisoning families trying to escape al-Shabab territory.

Al-Shabab's departure from the capital offers no guarantee that Somalia's weak transitional government will be able to capitalize on the opportunity, or rally behind the government.

Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has

been propped up by millions of dollars of Western aid, including U.S. military aid, but its leaders remain ineffective, divided and by many accounts corrupt.

"Unfortunately, I entertain no delusions that the TFG will rise to the occasion," said J. Peter Pham, Africa director at the Atlantic Council, a Washington-based policy institute. "The only expectancy that will be taking place will be whatever schemes its ministers will hatch to profit from in-

creased aid flows." As the nation faces one of the worst droughts in 60 years, many analysts are pessimistic that the government will be able to deliver. On Friday, government troops looted sacks of grain and killed several people during a riot over emergency food in a refugee camp.

Several Mogadishu residents interviewed on Saturday were happy al-Shabab was gone but a bit tentative about what it meant.

"It was good they left because they were very oppressive," said Mohamed Yare, who was arrested by al-Shabab a week ago for talking about soccer. "But, the government must come with

Somalia's Transitional Federal Government soldiers went on patrol in the Yaa

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