

# Hopes for peace fading in Somalia

MOHAMED SHEIK NOR  
Associated Press

**MOGADISHU, Somalia** - Somalis fled their violent capital by the hundreds on Tuesday, in cars and on foot, pulling carts heaped with belongings in a desperate attempt to leave an onslaught of mortar and rocket attacks behind them.

Government forces and Ethiopian troops exchanged heavy fire overnight with insurgents, leaving 15 dead and 45 injured in the heaviest fighting this year in Mogadishu. Among those killed were a 4-year-old boy and a pregnant woman. A 12-year-old girl lost both her legs, doctors said.

"We cannot keep our children in this violent situation," said Yonis Nor, who left the capital with his eight children and hundreds of other families. "I am scared."

Mogadishu's escalating violence threatens to plunge Somalia back into the years of anarchy and chaos that dogged the nation after 1991, when warlords overthrew dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, igniting a 16-year conflict.

Numerous attempts at restoring order have failed. The transitional government was formed in 2004 with U.N. help but - with no real army or police force - has had little authority.

The latest fighting also throws into doubt an 8,000-member African Union peacekeeping force, whose first troops - a small Burundian advance team - were scheduled to arrive as early as Friday. Uganda had planned to announce a date for the force's deployment on Wednesday, but canceled the news conference.

Nigeria, however, reiterated its peacekeeping commitment, saying Tuesday that its 850-troop contribution should arrive in the Horn of Africa nation by mid-April.

The insurgency has grown increasingly bloody since the government, backed by soldiers from neighboring Ethiopia, drove out an Islamic group that run the country according to Islamic law. The Islamic group had been welcomed by many Somalis, especially those in the capital who had known little but anarchy for more than a decade.

Insurgents have staged near-daily attacks, and Mogadishu's civilian population has suffered.

In the last three weeks, 51 people have been killed and more than 100 wounded. Ethiopian troops, largely seen as an occupying Christian force, have been accused of indiscriminate attacks against civilian-populated areas. Ethiopia and Somalia have also fought two wars, the last in 1977, when the Somali army suffered a catastrophic defeat.

Doctors say the fighting has overwhelmed them. "We are struggling to cope," Medina Hospital Dr. Dahir Mohamed said, as the wounded were being moved to corridors because there were no beds for them. "If the violence continues, we will run out of medicines."

Hopes were fading fast that the interim administration would be able to quell the unrest, with growing calls for a broad-based, new government supported by all segments of society. A new government crackdown against local media has also fueled resentment and mistrust.

Three Ethiopian and Somali government barracks and the presidential palace and seaport were targeted in the overnight attacks, before Ethiopian troops returned fire.

Deputy Defense Minister Salad Ali Jelle told the AP that one government soldier was killed in the latest attack.