

Canadians 'fought to death': 'A lot' killed in holy war, Somali, official says

National Post (Canada)

January 17, 2007

Stewart Bell

MOGADISHU

MOGADISHU - Volunteer fighters from Canada who travelled to Somalia to participate in what they thought was a holy war were killed during battles that erupted three weeks ago, Somalia's Deputy Prime Minister said yesterday.

Hussein Aideed said in an interview that Canadian citizens of Somali origin were among the hundreds of Islamist fighters killed on the battlefield since a Dec. 24 offensive by troops loyal to interim President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed.

The Somali-Canadians had returned to their ancestral homeland to take up arms in support of the Islamic Courts Union, a Taliban-like group with suspected links to al-Qaeda that controlled much of southern Somalia until it was ousted in late December.

"A lot of them died," said Mr. Aideed.

Asked again to confirm that Somali-Canadian fighters had been killed, he said: "Yes, because they believe in dying. They did not fight as tactical fighters. They fought to death."

The interim transitional government that has swept into power in recent weeks in this lawless and heavily armed nation has long claimed its rival, the Islamic Courts, was made up partly of foreign Muslim fighters -- much as Afghanistan was a magnet for jihadists from around the world under Taliban rule.

Canada has one of the world's largest Somali communities, and the National Post reported last fall that Somali-Canadians had returned to Mogadishu to join the Islamic Courts.

Among them is former Toronto resident Abdullahi Ali Afrah, a senior leader of the Islamist group.

The Department of Foreign Affairs said yesterday it had not been informed of any Canadians killed in Somalia in recent weeks, but Kenya has said it captured at least one suspected fighter with a Canadian passport trying to flee Somalia.

The Islamic Courts abandoned Mogadishu when pro-government troops, backed by

Ethiopia, advanced late last month, but Mr. Aideed said some of the wounded foreign fighters are still in the city. He said they will be arrested eventually, but police are in no hurry since they cannot escape.

The foreigners come from a broad array of countries, including Pakistan, Yemen and Kenya, he said.

"They are from the U.S., they are from Canada, passport holders. They are from Australia, who joined what they call quote-unquote the brotherhood of Islamic jihad."

Many young fighters recruited into the Islamic Courts militias were killed in two battles near Baydoa. Two thousand may have been killed there, mowed down by shelling, said Information Minister Ali Ahmed Jama.

"They were dying like flies, it was incredible," he said.

Others were killed in the south, where the United States carried out air strikes two weeks ago in an attempt to kill suspects wanted for their alleged roles in the 1998 bombings of two American embassies in East Africa.

Mr. Jama, himself a former Ottawa resident, said Canadians may have been among the dead, but he had heard no details or names.

"It's possible because many young people came from all over the world," he said. "I'm certain there are a few who joined what they call the jihad. They were sending them to their deaths."

Since it captured Mogadishu last June, the Islamic Courts leadership has portrayed itself as engaged in a holy war.

The group has gained mounting interest among extremists who incite youths, including al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

Aside from getting fighters from abroad, the Islamists were also receiving guns, according to a UN monitoring group that reported last year that the Islamic Courts was being armed, trained and funded by seven states, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya and Eritrea.

"Mo" Abdullahi Mohamed, a Somali-Canadian who now serves as personal secretary to Deputy Prime Minister Aideed, said a Toronto mosque had been recruiting youths to join the Islamic Courts. The mosque is affiliated with Al Itti had Al Islami, an al-Qaeda linked Somali terrorist group headed by Sheik Hassan Aweys, leader of the Islamic Courts shura council, he said.

Mr. Mohamed said he called the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi and warned

an official that Somali-Canadians were not only in the Islamist shabab militia, but were also being groomed for overseas terrorism.

"There are a lot of Somali Westerners, from Canada, the U.S., a lot of young Canadians are here that are being brainwashed to fight. Mostly they are in the shabab, the young Canadians."

Two Somalis were among 18 men arrested in Toronto last June for allegedly belonging to a "homegrown" terrorist group plotting attacks in Canada, but they are not suspected of having trained in Somalia.