

Sinai Militants Killed In Egypt Army Offensive

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Associated Press

CAIRO — Smoke billowed in the sky as Egyptian helicopter gunships rocketed suspected Islamic militant hideouts in the lawless northern Sinai Peninsula for a second day on Sunday, killing 11 suspected fighters as part of the largest military offensive in the region in years, military officials said.

They say the assault aims to drive out al-Qaida inspired groups from several villages of the restive border region, where militants have established strongholds and stockpiled an unprecedented amount of weapons.

Also Sunday, a militant group in northern Sinai allegedly claimed responsibility for a failed assassination attempt on the country's interior minister last week. In a statement attributed to Ansar Jerusalem posted on militant websites, the Islamic extremist group claimed it was behind the attack on Mohammed Ibrahim. The statement says military chief Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who led a coup against former Islamist President Mohammed Morsi, is another target.

A military official said 11 militants and one soldier were killed in the fighting on Sunday. He said 10 militants had been arrested. A day earlier two soldiers and nine militants were killed in the offensive. The official spoke anonymously because he was not authorized to release the information.

Gen. Osama Askar of the 3rd Army told reporters troops had seized at least 10 shoulder-fired Sam-7 anti-aircraft missiles a day earlier. They were found in a mosque and in homes of suspected militants in the town of Sheikh Zuweyid, near the border with the Gaza Strip and Israel.

Western officials say thousands of shoulder-launched missiles went missing from Libyan arsenals since that country's 2011 civil war. Egyptian authorities say Libyan missiles have been smuggled into the Sinai, and some of those have gone on through underground tunnels to Gaza.

Sunday's airstrikes targeted the villages of el-Mahdiya and el-Moqataa on the outskirts of Rafah and Sheikh Zuweyid. One official said U.S.-made Apache helicopters hit shacks, houses, olive farms and cars used by militants.

The strikes paved the

way for a ground offensive, allowing troops backed by armored vehicles to sweep homes of suspected militants.

Armed Forces spokesman Col. Ahmed Mohammed Ali said that helicopters had provided air cover for what was "the biggest security operation" in the northern Sinai in years. Ali's statement, posted on his official Facebook page, also said that 118 houses and farms used as hideouts had been demolished in the operation by Saturday.

A second military official in Cairo told The Associated Press that the military found heavy weapons, explosive belts for suicide bombers, mortars, RPGs, anti-aircraft missiles and maps with positions of the military in the region.

Residents witnessed columns of trucks and armored vehicles pouring into the area over the weekend. Some said they hadn't seen foot soldiers in their villages in decades. Communications were jammed for hours, as authorities seized control of two telephone exchanges. All roads leading up to the northern region of the peninsula have been sealed off and troops have encircled a dozen villages. Some local tribal leaders have expressed relief over the operation, but others remain skeptical, saying innocent men have been arrested arbitrarily.

Over the past weeks, the military has also bulldozed homes along the Gaza border and caved in tunnels beneath them in preparations for creating a buffer zone to reduce weapon smuggling and militant crossings.

Officials say militants are believed to be responsible for a series of attacks in a region they overran after the fall of autocrat Hosni Mubarak in 2011. The region has seen a spike in attacks since the Morsi's overthrow on July 3. The Cairo-based military official accused Morsi of giving militants free reign to stockpile weaponry by making deals with them to cease attacks when he was in office in return for amnesty and a halt of military action against them.

The militants, officials say, belong to a number of extremist groups that seek the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the northern Sinai based on a narrow and hard-line interpretation of the religion. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak

to the press.

The groups reject the ideologies of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood group as too moderate and view their participation in elections as heresy. They have said their goal is to drive out the authority of the central government, not to restore Morsi to power.

The alleged statement by Ansar Jerusalem, known in Arabic as Ansar Beyt el-

Maqdis, said the group will "avenge" the deaths of Muslims by the interior and defense ministers' forces, which have killed more than 100 militants in Sinai since Morsi was toppled. The country's security forces also raided two pro-Morsi protest camps in Cairo in mid-August that sparked several days of violence that killed more than 1,000 people, most of them Islamist

supporters of the Brotherhood.

The claim by the group could not be verified for authenticity. If it is true, it would be the first attack against security forces outside northern Sinai by the militants.

The ability of militants in Sinai to strike security forces has been limited to the peninsula so far. Ansar Jerusalem does not have

proven capabilities to carry out an attack in Cairo against the well-guarded interior minister, who was unharmed in the bombing. The group has carried out a few attacks in the past on gas pipelines to Israel amid a security vacuum in the area and claimed to be behind a 2012 shootout along the Israeli-Egyptian border in which three militants and an Israeli soldier were killed.

Ancient Christian Syrian Village Seized

AMMAN, Jordan (AP) — Syrian rebels led by al-Qaida-linked fighters seized control of a predominantly Christian village northeast of Damascus, sweeping into the mountain-side sanctuary in heavy fighting overnight and forcing hundreds of residents to flee, activists and locals said Sunday.

The battle over Maaloula, an ancient village that is home to two of the oldest surviving monasteries in Syria, has thrown a spotlight on the deep-seated fears that many of Syria's religious minorities harbor about the growing role of Islamic extremists on the rebel side in the civil war against President Bashar Assad's regime.

The prominence of al-Qaida-linked fighters has factored into the reluctance of Western powers to provide direct military support to the rebels. It has also figured in the debate underway in the U.S. Congress over whether to launch military strikes against Syria in retaliation for an alleged chemical weapons attack last month.

After days of clashes in and around Maaloula, rebels captured the village following fierce fighting late Saturday, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group. Observatory director Rami Abdul-Rahman said the assault was led by Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida-affiliated group, as well as by the Qalamon Liberation Front.

He said around 1,500 rebels were inside Maaloula, while the army had the village surrounded.

Opposition Leader Is 2nd In Mayor Race

MOSCOW (AP) — Opposition leader Alexei Navalny swept up far more votes than expected Sunday while finishing second in Moscow's mayoral election, a pivotal contest that has energized Russia's small opposition in ways that could pose a risk to the Kremlin in the days and years ahead.

Partial results released early Monday showed Navalny with about 27 percent of the vote, while the Kremlin-backed incumbent, Sergei Sobyanin, held a clear lead with about 52 percent. Exit polls, however, predicted Navalny would get as much as 32 percent.

As the results only began to trickle out two hours after the polls closed, Navalny said he suspected the vote count was being manipulated.

"We don't recognize the results that are currently being announced, and I would like to say that we won't give up one vote that we received," Navalny told reporters at his campaign headquarters late Sunday. "I call on the Kremlin and the mayor's office to restrain themselves from falsifications."

The election was being watched for what it bodes for the future of the opposition and for Navalny. He faces time in prison after being convicted of embezzlement in a case seen as part of a Kremlin effort to sideline him, but his strong showing could lead to a shortening of his five-year sentence, if the Kremlin feels this would help defuse discontent.

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