

Sanaa, Aug 9 (AP) - Al-Qaida militants killed 15 soldiers in southern Yemen after seizing them from a public bus on Friday, military officials and witnesses said, in apparent retaliation to an army offensive against the group.

The officials said the soldiers had been heading to Sanaa, the capital, for vacation from the southern city of Sayoun when militants stopped their bus, checked IDs and led soldiers out of the bus.

Militants shot them to death near the ancient city of Shibam, in the southern province of Hadramawt, officials said. Witness Naser Mahfouz said bodies of the soldiers were beheaded. It was not possible to verify his account.

Officials said an initial investigation showed that Jalal Belaidi, al-Qaida field commander in Sayoun, orchestrated the attack. Belaidi is among Yemen's most wanted al-Qaida militants and is accused of carrying out a series of attacks in the city, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

The Friday attack came after deadly clashes near Sayoun, where the Defense Ministry said army forces killed at least 25 al-Qaida militants over the past two days. The ministry said it has been sending reinforcements to the city after receiving information that al-Qaida is plotting the city's takeover.

Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula is seen by Washington as the most dangerous branch of the global terror network, and has been linked to a number of attempts to attack the U.S.

The United States has waged a longstanding drone campaign against al-Qaida suspects in Yemen, killing a number of high-ranking operatives but also scores of civilians, drawing criticism from the Yemeni government and human rights groups.