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## SOMALIA: PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Somalia is without a doubt the most neglected crisis in the world today. Over the past seventeen years, Somalia has been subject to ongoing civil wars, droughts and floods. Most observers agree that the crisis has never been as acute as it is today. The immense gap between the level of need and the corresponding humanitarian response is striking. Agencies struggle to provide food, water, health care, and other basic assistance to one million internally displaced people because of the worsening security crisis. Additionally, their own bureaucracies have not sufficiently adapted to the ground realities of this situation. Further complicating matters, the official Somali government propped up by the international community is viewed as illegitimate by its own people.

In order to stabilize Somalia and keep this crisis from spreading further, the international community must act now to find a viable solution to the political crisis in Somalia. International assistance is not a substitute to diplomatic engagement. The US must pressure the Ethiopian government to end numerous human rights abuses. The UN needs to increase its capacity to monitor and deliver impartial assistance by increasing numbers of international staff inside the country. And international peacekeepers must not be deployed until political preconditions are met, and unless UN member states are willing to provide them with the troops, equipment, and mandate to confront armed resistance and address the root political causes of the Somali conflict.

### I. A Staggering Scale of Need

Somalia has repeatedly been described as being ‘more tragic than Darfur’ and the ‘worst humanitarian crisis in Africa.’ Despite this, it has garnered shockingly little international attention. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates there are currently one million people displaced. Malnutrition rates for children under 5 are above emergency thresholds. In the first three months of 2008 alone, 60,000 people fled Mogadishu due to continued insecurity. Some 200,000 people have settled on the road to Afgooye, a village 30km west of Mogadishu, making it the most densely populated settlement of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world.

In Afgooye, families live in make-shift huts made of twigs and pieces of cloth. This population – accustomed to living and

### Policy Recommendations

1. The UN Security Council must approach the use of an international military force with extreme caution, and take seriously the Secretary General’s assessment that a peacekeeping deployment can only be successful when political efforts have created a modicum of peace to keep.
2. AMISOM should expand only under similar conditions as those that would permit the deployment of a UN force.
3. The US Administration must condemn human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian forces. The US Congress should investigate the conditions under which military support was provided to Ethiopia, ensuring it adheres to the principles outlined under US law.
4. UNHCR must dramatically increase its Somalia-based staff – focusing on national staff – to a level that enables ongoing protection work through periods of high insecurity.

working in an urban environment – is almost entirely dependent on aid: food, water, plastic sheeting, latrines, etc. UN agencies and humanitarian organizations are unable to keep up with the scale of the need.

In interviews with IDPs, the stories of violence and personal loss were heartbreakingly similar. Refugees International spoke to a mother who had fled Mogadishu that morning and arrived in Afgooye with her eight children, including a one-month old girl. Her husband had been killed the day before, crushed under debris after a shell landed near their house early in the morning. She had no choice but to leave everything behind and come to the camp in the search for safety. Her family was just one of 70 who had arrived in just 2 days from the same Mogadishu neighborhood.

Camps of several thousand IDPs can also now be found around major urban centers such as Beled Weyne, Galkayo and Bossasso, where the sheer numbers of displaced people have overwhelmed the capacity of the local community to absorb them. The closure of the Kenya border has left thousands, primarily women and children, stranded inside Somalia. The alternative route to the north, leading to Yemen, is strewn with dangers. According to one NGO, there are more than 150 checkpoints on a 750km stretch where women are often harassed, robbed and sometimes raped. Thousands have perished in the ensuing journey across the Gulf of Aden.

## II. Challenges to Political Reconciliation

In December 2006 Ethiopian forces intervened in defense of Somalia's internationally-recognized government, the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG). The Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) occupied parts of south central Somalia by overthrowing the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), a coalition of Sharia tribunals which controlled parts the country. The controversial Ethiopian occupation was officially meant to be temporary. Fifteen months later, the ENDF is bogged down in urban combat with heavy civilian casualties.

The international community's rhetoric emphasizes the need for bold new measures to break the political deadlock, including talks between the TFG and the Eritrea-based opposition. However, such political dialogue is premised upon the misleading assumption of the political viability of the government and unity of the opposition.

Based on Refugees International interviews, it is clear that Somalis view the TFG as an externally-imposed and illegitimate body. Abusive behavior by TFG security forces and their Ethiopian allies, as well as the lack of government services throughout large swaths of the country has resulted in dwindling popular support in the future of the TFG. This essential mistrust will need to be addressed be-

fore investments in capacity building and institution building can have any impact.

International recognition of the TFG will never be a surrogate for real legitimacy in the eyes of Somalis. Moreover, senior UN and NGO staff on the ground privately express their skepticism over the political viability of the TFG. In the words of one researcher, the TFG is a 'hologram' – projecting an image of a government acceptable to donors, but ultimately empty of any real power.

Just as there is little legitimacy in the TFG, there is no direct chain of command between the Asmara-based Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, an umbrella organization of various opposition groups, and all of the armed militia and anti-governmental forces operating in south central Somalia. A political agreement between the TFG and the opposition, which is the principal prerequisite for greater military and political engagement from the international community, must acknowledge this fragmentation.

## III. Peacekeeping and Security

Key members of the UN Security Council, as well as the TFG, are advocating for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission to replace the African Union mission (AMISOM) deployed in Mogadishu. Such a force would theoretically fill the security vacuum, protect civilians, allow for the safe delivery of humanitarian assistance and defend Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs). The debate over a UN peacekeeping operation has largely taken place on a theoretical level. Refugees International believes that a peacekeeping mandate is being considered without sufficient concern as to whether or not it represents a viable solution to the crisis in Somalia.

UN peacekeeping missions are most effective in contexts where the deployment of military peacekeepers has been accepted by the major warring factions, thus preventing UN forces from becoming another armed party to the conflict. Buy-in from the opposition will be necessary in Somalia, where the UN is rightly perceived as supporting the TFG.

In November 2007, the UN Secretary General issued a statement that emphasized the fact that under present conditions in Somalia, a peacekeeping mission was unlikely to produce positive results. Nevertheless, a number of international actors, including the US, have insisted that the UN should press forward anyway. In response, the UN Secretary General issued a separate report in March outlining steps for political reconciliation and the eventual deployment of a multidimensional UN peace operation. The report presents three main options for the Security Council to consider: the expansion of AMISOM, the deployment of an international stabilization force to enforce

peace, and the deployment of a UN-led multidimensional peace support operation.

#### *a) AMISOM*

The African Union (AU) was deployed with a mandate to provide protection to the TFIs, to defend key infrastructure, and to facilitate – to the extent possible – the delivery of humanitarian assistance. A total of 8,000 AMISOM troops were intended to deploy throughout Somalia. A year later, the force suffers from a lack of funding and equipment, with only 2,200 troops stationed in Mogadishu who are limited to defending key strategic infrastructure such as the seaport and airport.

For now the AMISOM force is seen as a non-threatening presence. Through limited ‘hearts and minds’ initiatives, and by refusing to support the counterinsurgency efforts of the TFG and Ethiopian forces, AMISOM troops are generally tolerated by insurgent militias and the Somali population at large.

Despite the difficulties in securing troop contributions, the AU has requested a ramping-up of AMISOM forces to the mandated 8,000 troops, and later to a possible 22,000 troops. They would take on a growing role within the capital, and slowly expand their presence outward. This strategy depends on maintaining the support of local populations, as well positive outcomes to political efforts with opposition forces. AMISOM illustrates the difficulties that a larger UN deployment can expect to face in Somalia. AMISOM should only proceed with expansion under similar conditions to those that would permit the deployment of a UN force.

#### *b) UN Multidimensional Peace Operation or International Stabilization Force*

The ongoing civilian protection crisis has raised the specter of the early 1990’s where international outcry over human suffering in Somalia precipitated the deployment of a military operation. Renewed attention at the level of the Security Council is a welcome change. However, the UN risks repeating the mistakes made in the 1990s with UNISOM I and II. This would do a great disservice to the Somalis and discredit the UN peacekeeping system that is simply not designed to cope with counter-insurgency operations.

The March 2008 Secretary General’s report calls for the deployment of an integrated, multidimensional UN force of some 27,000 troops, which would make Somalia the single largest peacekeeping deployment in the world. Refugees International supports the need for an integrated approach, addressing the political, humanitarian, and developmental dimensions of this crisis, as well as the report’s key conclusion that a UN peacekeeping deployment should proceed only if certain minimum requirements have been met on the political front.

The fragmented nature and diverse interest of the armed elements mean that a comprehensive ceasefire is unlikely. Given the UN’s history and current political posture in Somalia, a UN peacekeeping operation will never be universally perceived as neutral. If the Security Council authorizes this force, the mission mandate must clearly articulate the ways it can address the political roots of this crisis and combat military resistance. Any effort to frame a future mission as a primarily ‘humanitarian’ undertaking would be received with cynicism by the population and opposition from armed groups.

More problematic is an international stabilization force composed of a ‘coalition of willing partners.’ A “stabilization” force cannot be deployed without the perception of UN involvement. Such a force is likely to fail in the Somali context, and the risk that it would aggravate the situation is enormous.

There can be no externally imposed “stabilization” of Mogadishu. The unsuccessful U.S.-led task force that deployed to Somalia in 1992 initially numbered 37,000, including a large deployment of highly trained, well-equipped forces. Forces with the expeditionary capabilities of the U.S. military are unlikely to be made available this time and in any case, are clearly no guarantee of success. Extreme caution must be exercised in the consideration of such a course of action.

### **IV. A Culture of Impunity**

Somalia has existed in a security vacuum for over 17 years. Law and order fall to clan leaders, private militias, and, for a period, the Union of Islamic Courts. Since the fall of the UIC, the TFG has been unable to re-establish rule of law. In this chaotic conflict environment, human rights abuses continue to be committed by all sides of the conflict.

Most disturbing are the gross abuses committed by groups responsible for ensuring the security of Somalis. In Mogadishu, the epicenter of the violence in Somalia, the vast majority of civilians have fled as a result of the ‘search and sweep’ operations orchestrated by the TFG security forces and the Ethiopian military. Displaced Somalis told Refugees International about the shelling of entire neighborhoods and the indiscriminate killing of civilians. One woman who had fled Mogadishu recounted how her husband had been shot in the streets as he was walking home from work in the Bakara market area.

Internally displaced Somalis blame Ethiopian forces for the violence and their personal losses. TFG security forces, including the army and the police, are also implicated in cases of harassment, intimidation and looting of NGO property.

Operational NGOs bearing witness to these attacks are unable to speak out, for fear of retribution and concerns about access to the civilian population. Several initiatives have

been put forward to end the cycle of impunity and hold perpetrators to account. Unfortunately there is little momentum as the international community is both slow to acknowledge the scale of abuses and loath to alienate the armed forces they see as providing stability in the country.

The role of the US is increasingly problematic. Despite repeated denials of any role in the Ethiopian invasion, the US is perceived as supporting the Ethiopian presence and the reprehensible behavior of Ethiopian troops. Furthermore, the designation of al-Shabab as a foreign terrorist organization, coupled with the heavy-handed bombings of individual targets, further fuels anti-American sentiment. These military actions undermine the diplomatic push for political reconciliation and galvanize extremist elements, reinforcing the very threat that US policy in the Horn of Africa is meant to address.

Refugees International strongly encourages the US Administration to condemn human rights violations committed by the Ethiopian forces. RI recommends that the US Congress investigate any military support that was provided to Ethiopia to ensure it adheres to US law.

## V. Improving Humanitarian Assistance and Protection

Inconsistent international staff presence and an endemic diversion of aid by all actors in Somalia have led to a breakdown in respect for humanitarian values. The humanitarian response in Somalia is dictated not by the needs of the population but by the constraints operational agencies face which are a product of shifting localized realities – presence of armed factions, communication with local authorities, clan dynamics, and historical presence of humanitarian actors – as well as agencies' own guidelines.

The recent targeted kidnapping and killing of aid workers has worsened an already difficult operating environment. Most agencies work by 'remote control': decisions are made in Nairobi and delegated to Somali staff for implementation. While some organizations have maintained a high level of operability in most parts of south central Somalia, others suffer from inconsistent access. In particular, UN staff are required to abide by more conservative security guidelines than most NGOs. Some senior staff have been unable to go to Mogadishu for months. The UN response, directed almost entirely out of Nairobi, is often – and self consciously – out of touch with the fast changing realities on the ground. There is a clear discrepancy between the lax work tempo in Nairobi headquarters and the urgency in Somalia (including the observance of a different working week).

Moreover, the UN humanitarian response in Somalia is organized through 'clusters' which are supposed to promote greater accountability and identify gaps in the response. National sectoral clusters are not adapted to re-

mote-control programming, and it appears that the cluster approach – with its added bureaucratic layers – has hampered the humanitarian response in Somalia.

In a constraints-driven environment, identifying gaps on a sectoral basis is a moot exercise. Clusters translate into two procedural layers: meetings in Mogadishu between Somali staff who have little decision-making power; and meetings in Nairobi between international staff who are out of touch with daily problems. Even at a Nairobi level, inter-cluster information is reportedly poorly shared.

This practice has several implications for the protection response. UNHCR chairs the "protection cluster" and relies on local NGOs to monitor protection needs: health, food, water, shelter, sexual violence reporting, etc. By its own admission, the reporting is inadequate and incomplete. UNHCR must increase its field-based staff, focusing on Somali staff, to enable ongoing protection work through periods of high insecurity. International staff presence should not be seen as a prerequisite to quality protection monitoring.

## VI. Conclusion

Expressions of optimism by the diplomatic community belie realities on the ground. The Somali transitional charter calls for elections in 2009, an ambitious proposition. It seems misplaced to talk about a window of opportunity when the country is in the midst of its worst crisis in decades.

International support to the Somali government has resulted in a blinkered view of its activities and an unwillingness on the part of donors to address its failures and abuses. The TFG is our 'plan A', so the argument goes, and there never was a 'plan B'. The international community cannot forget that the TFG is an unelected government. Any legitimacy it garners must be derived from the protection it affords its people.

In the face of such an intractable situation, many actors are calling for 'bold action.' There is no silver bullet however, including the prospects of a future peacekeeping deployment. More forceful diplomatic engagement and leverage over the existing government is possible, and should be the first course of action.

Peace cannot be imposed militarily. Any 'stabilization force' will face resistance reminiscent of the early 1990's. And a UN peacekeeping deployment can not be pursued until basic political preconditions – and particularly opposition buy-in – have been met. Such a mission must be crafted around a political strategy, not vague humanitarian justifications.

As the debate over next steps progresses, Refugees International urges members of the UN Security Council to cautiously approach the authorization of a UN peacekeeping

operation, and to seriously consider the UN's own political and financial capacities, as well as the challenges outlined in this bulletin. Before designing and authorizing any UN force, the Security Council should assess the scope and complexity of the conflict in Somalia, the resources that will be necessary, and the ability to provide it with the political, material and human resources that it needs to succeed. A Security Council mandate that amounts to no more than a symbolic gesture would be one more betrayal in two decades of missed opportunities and broken promises.

While insecurity will continue to challenge the delivery of aid, the UN in particular should take a hard look at its mode of operation. The UN's political role in Somalia has hampered its reputation as an impartial humanitarian actor. Its lack of visibility and the lack of international staff present in the field affect this perception. But it is the UN's inability to dissociate politics and aid that presents the greatest obstacle.

*In February and March 2008, advocate Patrick Duplat and peacebuilding advocate Erin Weir assessed the conditions faced by displaced Somalis in parts of Lower Shabelle, Mogadishu and along the Mogadishu-Afgooye road. During the mission, they interviewed representatives from UN agencies, local and international NGOs, government and local authorities, as well as Somalis who have been affected by the conflict.*

## About Refugees International

Refugees International generates lifesaving humanitarian assistance and protection for displaced people around the world and works to end the conditions that create displacement. Based on our on-the-ground knowledge of key humanitarian emergencies, Refugees International provides governments, international agencies and non-governmental organizations with effective solutions to improve the lives of displaced people.

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