

# Emergency within an emergency: Somali IDPs

by Hassan Noor

**International media report that over 300,000 Somalis have been newly displaced by fighting in Mogadishu. Conflict-related displacement hits the headlines but the numbers displaced by environmental change are also colossal. The international response remains woefully inadequate.**

Hardly any Somali family has escaped the experience of displacement. Displacement was first experienced in the mid 1970s and 1980s, both as a result of drought and attacks on civilians launched by Siad Barre, the military ruler of Somalia from 1969 to 1991. Displacement in northern Somalia displaced hundreds of thousands who became refugees in Ethiopia. Displacement escalated massively when civil war broke out in the early 1990s. In terms of the proportion of the population displaced, the

Somali displacement crisis is worse than that of Darfur or Iraq.

'IDP' is a useful term for purposes of definition but it does not capture the kind of reality that Somalia is now facing. It is important to distinguish between CDPs – conflict-displaced people – and EDPs – environmentally displaced people. Conflict-related displacement in Somalia is the direct result of the civil war and turbulent politics. CDPs are estimated to number around 600,000 with possible conflict in Kismayo and

Mogadishu potentially exacerbating the figure to nearly a million. CDPs have been forced to leave their homes for security reasons, a type of displacement with a huge long-term impact on families and continued dependence on humanitarian assistance. Fighting between the Islamists and the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) erupted as civilians struggled to cope with massive flooding in riverine areas of south Somalia in November and December which added 300,000 to the existing number of EDPs displaced by drought.

## Somalia's forgotten displaced

Amidst the complexity of recurrent displacement in Somalia, few notice that there are displaced people who



*A woman with her children at an IDP camp in Arare, southern Somalia.*

are neither IDPs nor Somalis. These refugees include significant numbers of Ethiopians (members of the Oromo ethnic group – the country's largest) who have fled once more to escape Ethiopian soldiers supporting the TFG. There are also Tanzanians (from the island of Zanzibar) and Sudanese. They have serious unmet needs for protection and assistance. Their numbers cannot be quantified but it is estimated there are several thousand.

Significant numbers of Somalis have been *refouled* and the phenomenon is increasing. Saudi Arabia has forcibly repatriated Somalis for many years. As the numbers of Somalis and Ethiopian Oromo in Kenya, Uganda and Yemen continue to rise, it is likely that more will be sent back to Somalia against their will. Kenya has recently closed access to the thousands of Somalis encamped along its border. Despite the recent enactment of a new refugee law<sup>1</sup> it has allegedly detained and forcibly returned Somalis without UNHCR having had the chance of determining whether they qualified for refugee status. More and more Somalis – and non-Somalis fleeing Somalia – are likely to end up entrusting their lives to traffickers as they seek to reach safety in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

### Urgent national and international action needed

Since 1991, there has been no national entity responsible for IDP response. The gradual attempt of the TFG to re-install itself in Mogadishu has unleashed considerable effort on several sides to take ownership of the IDP issue. The newly-established National Refugee Commission has declared that IDPs fall under its mandate but its capacity is limited by the TFG's inability to regain control of Mogadishu, let alone the whole of Somalia. The duty to provide protection and assistance to the Somali population thus remains with the international community and Somali NGOs, often supported financially by local businessmen.

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are largely unknown in Somalia. The protection of IDPs is, first and foremost, a duty of the national authorities and it is imperative that members of the TFG and regional states – as well as

non-state actors – are encouraged to take the lead. UN agencies, the ICRC and international NGOs cannot substitute for competent local authorities. Somalis need to be helped to understand their role and responsibility of care with regard to both IDPs and refugees.

In Somalia, as in Darfur, displacement is a reminder of the conflict that needs to be resolved. There is a need for a robust response from the UN and the African Union to end the sixteen-year-long cycle of violence and displacement. The AU is faced with a difficult mission. The AU must not again be deprived of the resources it needs to achieve its objectives. There is also a need for clarity regarding its mission. When I was in Darfur it was apparent that AU forces had little understanding of their mandate: indeed I never got to see what it was, for it was forever being drafted. Too much is at stake for Africa to allow another poorly-equipped and malfunctioning AU mission with only a limited and time-bound mandate to be set up only to fail once again.

Promotion of understanding towards the respect of law is a key tool in resolving conflicts, protecting civilians and realising good governance. Somalia urgently needs the kinds of rule of law programmes which have been developed in Darfur.<sup>3</sup> Justice and Confidence Centres run by local communities could help the transition to peace.

A major obstacle to a more concerted humanitarian response is donor reluctance to engage in Somalia, mostly related to previous failure to achieve tangible improvement. The 2007 Coordinated Humanitarian Appeal (CAP) for Somalia – outlined by OCHA in November 2006 – identifies one million people in need of assistance, which includes 400,000 IDPs. By April 2007, the CAP was covered for 33%, with most funds going to the food sector. Less than 10% of the health, protection, shelter and agriculture sectors were covered, while education and recovery programmes had received no funding at all. Along with the extremely complex political context, chronic under-funding of the CAP is a serious obstacle to a successful reconciliation and reconstruction process in Somalia. While political

diplomacy is working towards national reconciliation, recent UN advocacy for Somalia called on donors to consider long-term funding, which would demonstrate real international commitment to the many aspects of Somalia's recovery, particularly in relatively stable Somaliland and Puntland.

Insecurity in Mogadishu and surrounding areas, as well as roadblocks, port closures and marine piracy, are creating difficulties for humanitarian access, the importation of food and non-food commodities and inter-regional trade flows in southern and central Somalia. Activities in the main Mogadishu port have slowed down with a wide knock-on effect on the supply and price of imported food and non-food commodities. Despite the availability of locally produced cereals at relatively low prices, food access for displaced populations, especially the poorest, is difficult due to the sudden disruption in livelihoods and loss of income-earning abilities.

The most recent displacement from Mogadishu occurred in a climate of indiscriminate violence against civilians. Many of them have had to endure extortion and harassment, especially when they cannot enjoy clan-based protection. Most IDPs have largely been left to their own devices, and information on living conditions and protection issues remains scarce. Morbidity, mainly from diarrhoeal diseases (due to consumption of unsafe water) and malaria, is on the increase in many places in south and central Somalia. A marked increase in Acute Watery Diarrhoea (AWD) and cholera has been reported, mostly linked to post-flood conditions, and to lack of safe drinking water and sanitation. The areas with the highest AWD prevalence (Mogadishu and surrounding regions) are also the areas most difficult to access for treatment. Somalia remains chronically food-insecure and malnutrition remains a serious problem. The riverine areas continue to be extremely food-insecure due to the aftermath of the floods and insecurity. In addition, the rains have failed in large parts of Somalia and food insecurity is expected to worsen. IDPs are generally particularly vulnerable

to malnutrition, as they have fewer possibilities to support themselves.

Due to widespread insecurity, the international presence in south and central Somalia remains weak and inconsistent, and highly insufficient considering the enormous needs of the population, especially in and around Mogadishu and other southern towns.

In the absence of a functioning government, the UN and national and international NGOs are often the only service providers and interact directly with clan leaders and local authorities. Especially in the south, in a context of ever-changing local power structures and clan affiliations, negotiating access is difficult.

The premature and abrupt termination of the UN mission in Somalia in 1995 continues to have a

negative impact on the quality and quantity of humanitarian assistance to Somali IDPs. Since the withdrawal, the international aid community responsible for Somalia has been based in Nairobi. The UN's operational presence has been fairly consistent in Somaliland and Puntland but has remained sparse in south and central Somalia, ensured largely through Somali national staff. Concern Worldwide is the only international organisation that has maintained full presence in southern Somalia since the 1991 operations. ICRC has maintained access to most of the southern regions through continued negotiations with local leaders. Some INGOs maintain a presence through national staff. The Somali diaspora has made outstanding efforts to support displaced civilians and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars during the flooding in late December. It is unfortunate that their efforts are

not linked to overall coordination mechanisms. Links need to be forged between INGOs and the diaspora to give greater impetus to joint advocacy.

The operational gap between Nairobi and the field level remains, despite recent attempts to bridge it. Somalia is one of the four countries where the new cluster approach<sup>4</sup> – a key

was moving back to the capital, and to meet the high expectations of the population for reconciliation, security and resumption of basic services. This call for immediate re-engagement was met with scepticism by some humanitarian actors. At the end of March 2007 the security situation in Mogadishu had degenerated so far as to make humanitarian access virtually

impossible even for local NGOs. In May John Holmes became the most senior UN official to visit Mogadishu in a decade. Urging the TFG to provide a more enabling operating environment for aid workers, he reported that aid workers are only reaching about a third of those afflicted by Mogadishu's worst fighting for years. Hundreds of thousands of people who have fled outside the city and surrounding regions live without

*Destruction of property, Mogadishu, Somalia, May 2007.*



Aveys Yusuf Osmani/IRIN

element of the UN's humanitarian reform process – is being rolled out. The cluster approach has helped agencies recognise response gaps but has not consistently led to filling them. Collaboration between UN agencies and NGOs, both local and international, is not fully in place. As lead agency for the protection cluster, UNHCR has taken on a coordination and gaps analysis role with regard to the response to the internal displacement situation. Its operational presence in Somalia is limited. The humanitarian response could profit from better collaboration with local actors, who often work in areas considered inaccessible by the international community.

In early 2007 John Holmes, the newly-appointed UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC), called on the international aid community to re-engage in Mogadishu, taking advantage of the fact that the TFG

food, water and shelter and need immediate assistance. "In terms of numbers and access to them," Holmes told a news conference, "Somalia is a worse displacement crisis than Darfur or Chad or anywhere else this year."

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1. See article by Eva Ayiera on pages 26-27.  
 2. See Hanno van Gemund, 'From Somalia to Yemen: great dangers, few prospects', FMR27 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR27/45.pdf  
 3. See Sarah Maguire and Maarten G Barends, 'Promoting the rule of law in Darfur', FMR 25 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2525.pdf  
 4. Tim Morris, 'UNHCR, IDPs and clusters', FMR 25 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2531.pdf