

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNITED NATIONS MISSION OBSERVES DETERIORATING SITUATION IN PARTS OF SOMALI REGION OF ETHIOPIA

(New York, 19 September 2007): A recent United Nations inter-agency mission to Ethiopia's Somali Regional State observed that humanitarian conditions within the conflict areas have deteriorated substantially over the past several months. The mission took place between 30 August and 5 September and visited three of the five administrative zones in which military operations are currently underway. The mission assessed all aspects related to the provision of humanitarian assistance and made a preliminary assessment of the food situation, the effectiveness of food aid allocations, livelihoods and market conditions, the health and nutrition situation and human rights including protection of civilians.

The mission observed that recent fighting has led to a worsening humanitarian situation, in which the price of food has nearly doubled. Government restrictions of commercial and livestock trade aimed at preventing contraband activity have markedly aggravated an already fragile food security and livelihood situation. Livestock prices have fallen by as much as one-third due to a drastic reduction of export trade from the areas of military operations. Food reserves at the household level are nearly exhausted among the communities visited. Moreover, food aid operations in the zones affected by military operations have been seriously delayed. Given these factors, the mission fears that the nutritional status of the population will rapidly worsen within two or three months if only limited quantities of commercial food continue to be available. Compounding this situation are acute shortages of drugs and other medical supplies and inadequate access to clean drinking water.

The report of the mission calls for several actions. Conditions should be created to permit a substantial increase in commercial food deliveries throughout the region and actions taken to facilitate increased livestock trade. Emergency food aid should be provided immediately for approximately 600,000 people for three months. Food distributions should be impartial and should reach all intended beneficiaries. Drugs for health facilities and support to establish mobile health teams for health and nutrition responses should also be provided immediately.

The mission observed that many people in these areas fear for their individual safety and security and expressed trepidation at being caught in the middle of the ongoing conflict between the Ethiopian National Defence Forces and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. The mission also noted with concern reports of a worrying human rights and protection situation for the civilian population, which requires further investigation, and recommended that immediate actions should be taken to protect civilians in the conflict, including women and children. The UN has offered its cooperation to the Government of Ethiopia to follow up on all of the recommendations of the mission.

"Given the clear suffering of the families in these zones, and the probable deterioration in their lot, I hope that the Government of Ethiopia and the ONLF will do everything in their power to ensure immediate, safe and full access for humanitarian organizations into the region," said John Holmes, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator. "It was a good sign that the mission was able to visit, and I hope that this cooperation can continue. We are currently discussing this with the Government."

Somali Regional State, one of the poorest in Ethiopia, is home to approximately 4.5 million people, of whom an estimated 1.8 million live in the five zones where current military operations are ongoing. The details of the report have been shared with the Government of Ethiopia, and the United Nations stands ready to support the Government in increasing delivery of humanitarian assistance in the region.