

**Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in Africa:  
Humanitarian Affairs in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia**

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**6 December 2007**

Mr. President

Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Council on my visit to Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, from 26 November to 4 December.

In Ethiopia I wanted to assess the humanitarian situation in the Somali Region, and discuss with the government widespread fears of a severe humanitarian crisis there. The Somali Region, one of the poorest regions of Ethiopia, has long been badly affected by the conflict between government forces and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. Intensification of this conflict during 2007 has led to fears that already chronic food insecurity could give way to real famine conditions for a significant part of the 4.5 million population.

A UN Assessment Team, which visited the region in early September, identified specific reasons for concern. First, the military operations, and in particular government concerns about the smuggling of weapons from Somalia, had severely limited movement of commercial traffic across the Somali border. This is a historic trade route supporting the livelihood of 1.4 million people, predominantly pastoralists, whose income to buy food from across the border depends on the export of livestock.

Second, insecurity had also had a direct effect on the delivery of food aid, required in recent years to assist the most vulnerable elements of the population. For example, it is currently estimated that 950,000 people require 53,000 metric tonnes of food for the next

three months, but the process of moving the first 9,000 tonnes to the district capitals has only just been completed.

A poor recent rainy season and evidence of worrying health and nutrition situations have added to these fears. Finally, humanitarian access to the military zones, already heavily restricted, was aggravated in July when the government expelled ICRC and MSF-Holland from the region.

The government did not necessarily accept the evidence presented in the UN report but nevertheless agreed to implement its recommendations, in particular on commercial trade and food aid. And after further negotiations they have now allowed the UN to set up offices in two locations within the military zones, namely Kebredahar and Degahabur. 18 NGOs have been cleared to work in the military area to deliver much needed humanitarian assistance.

Mr. President, against this background, I visited Jijiga, the regional capital, and Kebredahar. I talked to the local authorities, and to UN and NGO humanitarian workers. I saw briefly a food distribution in Kebredahar, which might have been particularly staged for my visit. I was also able to look into the local market, where food was on sale, but at prices which seemed well above those in previous years, although food prices have increased significantly in Ethiopia generally in recent months.

In Addis Ababa, I talked to members of the Government, from Prime Minister Meles Zenawi down, about their views of the situation, as well as ways to improve the humanitarian response. We also discussed reported human rights violations.

The government's view, in brief, is that claims of major humanitarian problems are much exaggerated; that there are now no restrictions on commercial trade; and that there should be no difficulty in getting food aid to the people, including in the remote areas. We had to agree to disagree about the analysis of the crisis, though we will try to reconcile our respective data. But the Prime Minister helpfully confirmed that the government would respond as if our worst case scenario predictions were justified. He assured me that all necessary steps would be taken to avoid any famine.

On this basis I urged him and the Deputy Prime Minister to allow full humanitarian access to the region, to speed up relief efforts, to enable more NGOs to operate within the military zone, to allow WFP trucks to move in at least the safer areas without military escorts, to allow local government officials to resume their normal work, particularly in the health area, and to establish a high-level regular coordination forum between the government and the humanitarian community.

There has not yet been agreement to all these requests but I believe we have made some progress, including in terms of access and presence on the ground. Nevertheless there is a huge amount still to do.

My own initial assessment of the crisis, on the basis of my visit and the contacts I was able to make, is that while there may not currently be a humanitarian catastrophe, there are strong reasons to believe such a catastrophe could occur in the next few months if all the necessary action to avert it is not taken. I should nevertheless make clear that no-one from outside has yet been able to visit many of the remote rural areas, where the conflict has been worst. The situation could well be even more serious there.

We have all also seen and heard worrying reports about the human rights situation. The UN report recommended that the Government allow them to be investigated independently. I heard, indirectly, further reports of the same alarming kind while I was in the region. I took these up with the Government and urged them again to allow independent investigation and monitoring. They contested the reports but said they would be responding to them. I take this opportunity to repeat the plea that any local investigation should also involve independent outside experts. Otherwise suspicions about dreadful things happening, involving all sides, cannot be dispelled.

In sum, Mr. President, the commitments of the Ethiopian Government, at the most senior level, to do everything necessary to make sure there is no famine give me a measure of hope. But I repeat that, if all the steps I have talked about are not taken, a disaster could unfold with frightening speed. For my part I will continue to monitor this very closely and am ready to authorize more resources, for example from CERF, if that should be needed. In the longer term, a return of peace and stability to the region would obviously be the best guarantee against disaster. I hope some kind of inclusive political dialogue to this end can

start again soon. Meanwhile, I encourage the international community, not least members of this Council, to monitor the situation and to encourage political progress, in the light of the potential implications for peace and security in an increasingly explosive region.

Mr. President,

Let me turn to Sudan. My objective was to review the implementation of the *Joint Communiqué on the facilitation of Humanitarian assistance*, signed just after my first visit in March, and to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground. Currently, some 13,300 relief workers in Darfur are assisting 4.2 million people affected by the conflict, including almost 2.4 million displaced. But the situation is gradually deteriorating, and the operation in many ways remains fragile. My serious concerns include restrictions on access, violence affecting civilians and aid workers, and respect of humanitarian principles by all parties to the conflict.

The *Joint Communiqué* has helped to reduce some of the bureaucratic obstacles hindering relief agencies. While this progress is welcome, significant problems still remain. There are continuing challenges about implementation of some of the fast-track procedures, such as the issue of initial entry visas, exit visas for NGO workers and the release of equipment from customs. Nevertheless, I welcome the clear assurances I was given about the renewal of the fast-track procedures when they expire on 31 January 2008.

In my meetings with Government representatives, I also stressed the importance of strengthening trust and confidence between the Government and the humanitarian community, and ensuring full implementation of the *Joint Communiqué* in spirit as well as letter.

Clashes between signatories and non-signatories of the Darfur Peace Agreement, aerial bombardments, militia and inter-tribal clashes, banditry and general lawlessness continue to have a major impact on the population of Darfur. This year, nearly 280,000 more civilians have been forced to flee violence, many for the second or third time, to already overflowing IDP camps or to seek refuge in the bush. The consequences are significant – for example increases in malnutrition in several areas of Darfur.

There are other grim consequences too. In Adilla, an area in eastern South Darfur not far from Haskanita in North Darfur, where fighting started in August, one medical clinic

reported 183 cases of sexually transmitted infections in September, including 40 cases in children under five years old. Some of the survivors were in the camp I visited near Ed Daein, although heavy security prevented me from speaking to them privately.

Continuing hostilities and the unpredictable security situation are the greatest obstacles to access. But there is also justified concern over the refusal of national authorities to allow access in certain areas, for example Adilla and Jebel Marra, where there are tens of thousands of civilians in severe need. Access to some of the IDP camps near Nyala in South Darfur has, on occasion, also been restricted.

Meanwhile attacks on humanitarian personnel continue at unprecedented levels. Since the start of the year, 128 humanitarian vehicles have been hijacked, 118 staff temporarily taken hostage, more than 59 humanitarian personnel physically or sexually assaulted, and 74 convoys ambushed and looted. Tragically, 12 relief workers have also been killed. In other words, those who have come just to help continue to be attacked, in an atmosphere of near total impunity.

Those responsible for these attacks are often hard to identify with certainty. But they appear to come mainly from rebel groups and SLA-Minni Minawi elements. Hijackings and compound break-ins are also a growing phenomenon in and around the main towns such as Nyala and El Fasher, where the government is clearly in control. In this context, I welcomed the pledge from a senior Government official to increase patrols in such areas.

Mr. President,

During my visit Government officials repeatedly suggested that some humanitarian staff in Darfur were engaged in inappropriate activities. It is important to emphasize, as I did, that monitoring and speaking up for the rights of civilians and respect for humanitarian law and principles are fundamental to humanitarian action, and reflect the concerns of this Council. During my visit I appealed to the government to use the High Level Committee as a forum for discussion to address any concerns, rather than to take unilateral actions such as the recent expulsion of the head of the OCHA office in South Darfur, which we have strongly contested. Humanitarian workers are there to help the people of Sudan and to help the Government of Sudan fulfil its responsibility to protect its own citizens, not for any other reason.

Mr. President,

The return or relocation of IDPs is clearly a very sensitive issue. Like the IDPs themselves, the UN and NGOs working in Darfur look forward eagerly to a time when peace is a reality, and when people can return to their areas of origin in conditions of safety and dignity, or make the choice to settle elsewhere. In line with international principles and agreements between the United Nations and the Government of Sudan, return or resettlement must be voluntary – free of pressure or coercion – and take place only after consultations with the displaced themselves and the humanitarian community. In several areas such as Marla and Yassin in South Darfur, and near Kutum in North Darfur, some voluntary return has occurred with the support of the humanitarian community. However, the necessary conditions for large-scale returns across Darfur do not yet exist, in my view and in the view of most outside observers, and to encourage return without security would endanger the lives of those who have already suffered too much. The UN nevertheless stands ready to work on returns with the Government and the displaced as and when the conditions are appropriate.

Another key current issue in some of the more volatile camps, such as Kalma near Nyala, is the presence of arms, which jeopardizes the safety of all concerned. I call on all parties to respect the civilian character of the camps. Recent constructive discussions between the Government of Southern Darfur and AMIS about how to tackle the problems in Kalma camp are welcome, and show the way forward.

Mr. President, the reality is that the need for humanitarian assistance in Darfur continues to grow. The 2008 Work Plan for Sudan will appeal for \$825 million for humanitarian needs and some early recovery activities in Darfur. In this context let me repeat how much I would like to see the Moratorium on Restrictions and fast-track procedures formally extended soon, since that would give all partners of the Work Plan, particularly NGOs, the certainty they need to plan ahead for 2008.

I have detailed these challenges to underscore that, despite its scale and relative success in sustaining millions and saving hundreds of thousands of lives, the humanitarian operation in Darfur is increasingly fragile. Morale among humanitarians is low – lower than when I was last there in March, because of the multiple pressures I have mentioned. The political context is changing as rebel groups jockey for position and some Arab groups flex

their muscles in new ways. The Government of Sudan, and all the armed groups, have a particular responsibility to avoid any unraveling of the humanitarian operation.

The main requirement as we all know is an inclusive peace agreement as soon as possible, reinforced by a peace-keeping force capable of monitoring the peace and ensuring the protection of civilians. But while it is right to ensure the focus on the justice, political and peacekeeping tracks, the humanitarian operation could soon be in real jeopardy. It requires close monitoring from all concerned, not least this Council.

Finally I have talked only about Darfur today. I did not visit Juba in the South on this mission. But there are significant continuing humanitarian operations in the South and I take this opportunity to underline as forcefully as I can the fundamental importance of the North - South relationship, including for Darfur.

Mr. President, the last leg of my mission was a brief visit to Somalia, for the second time this year.

I visited the area where a large proportion of those fleeing the capital have sought shelter. The UN estimates that more than half of the city has been emptied of its citizens, or 600,000 people altogether. Some 230,000 of them are now living along a 15-kilometre stretch of road between Mogadishu and the small town of Afgooye, probably the single largest IDP gathering in the world today.

I drove along most of this road and was able to see the extent of the over 70 IDP camps. Some have mushroomed in the past month. Others already have signboards advertising the name of the settlement and even the phone number, as if they expected to last.

All the people I spoke to in the camps had fled the violence and intimidation that have made life in Mogadishu so unlivable. Some spoke to me of snipers fueling panic in the streets. Many left with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

I visited a recent IDP settlement called Gutale, hosting about 600 families. The shelters were rudimentary, literally branches and cloth, and people's distress was clear. Nevertheless an active relief response is now visible. Clean water is being trucked in;

distributions of plastic sheeting are providing cover; building of much-needed latrines and sanitation facilities is making progress. A five-day vaccination campaign for all the children in the areas was well underway while I was there, and WFP had recently distributed food to 180,000 people.

I also visited the largest camp known as Hawa Abdi, named after the doctor who has run a clinic there for the past 16 years, with more than 4,000 families or 25,000 people. Dr. Hawa Abdi runs a treatment centre there, which also hosts a therapeutic feeding center run by MSF Switzerland. Every one of the 60 beds for malnourished children was being used, reflecting the alarming malnutrition rates. Dr. Abdi herself is an inspiring example of the dedication of some Somali citizens to relieve the suffering of their own people.

Virtually all these relief activities are implemented through local partners or national staff of international NGOs and UN agencies. With very few exceptions international humanitarian staff do not feel able to work in the area because of security concerns, including extortion and violence at check points and road blocks. Our convoy had the benefit of heavy security arrangements. Armed elements were nevertheless clearly visible along the road. The prevailing atmosphere of mistrust between the authorities and the international organizations, and resulting incidents and administrative difficulties, have not helped.

Let me therefore pay warm tribute to the humanitarian workers who operate in such a hostile environment, particularly national staff who have often themselves now been displaced from Mogadishu with their own families.

Mr. President, while a decent relief effort may now be underway in the area I visited, there are still huge challenges. I am particularly concerned about the seriousness of the situation of the other hundreds of thousands of people displaced from Mogadishu, scattered over inaccessible areas in South and Central Somalia.

I am even more concerned about those still in Mogadishu. A WFP programme to serve up to 50,000 prepared meals a day to the most vulnerable has just started. However, such efforts are far from enough to cover the needs – particularly if violence and displacement continue at their current pace.

In Baidoa, I met the newly appointed Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein, former President of the Somali Red Crescent Society. Mr. Hussein shared my concern about the severity of the humanitarian crisis and agreed that there should be no distinction among vulnerable people when it comes to the right to be assisted. He also promised the Government's full help. We discussed ways to overcome the mistrust between the Transitional Federal Government and the international humanitarian organizations and the priority to be given to the protection of civilians, particularly in Mogadishu. He made clear that the humanitarian crisis, security and political reconciliation were his three top priorities. We need to see that translated into action.

Meanwhile we need to step up our relief efforts further. There are some 1.5 million people in need altogether. I therefore appeal to the donor community, the Agencies and the international NGOs to increase their presence and the resources dedicated to Somalia. In 2007, we requested \$300 million for the Somalia Consolidated Appeal. In 2008, that figure will rise to at least \$400 million.

But a robust humanitarian response cannot make up for the absence of desperately needed political and security progress. I fear, on the basis of what I heard, that increasingly terrible things are now happening in Mogadishu, as it descends into the nightmare of urban guerrilla warfare and reciprocal atrocities. Respect for International Humanitarian Law is essential now more than ever, a point I raised strongly with both the Ethiopian and Somali Governments, but which applies just as much to those fighting them.

The international community has the responsibility not to abandon the Somali people to their fate but to help all concerned to find a way out of the traps they find themselves in. There is no simple solution, certainly not a military one. And peacekeeping forces need a peace to keep, above all in this troubled country. But lack of high-level attention is not an option for Somalia, any more than it is for Darfur.

Mr. President, I am extremely concerned by the humanitarian situation in all three areas I visited. They are a reflection of the huge linked political and security challenges which this region now faces, and which must be a major concern for this Council.

Thank you, Mr. President.