

## **Somalia Op-ed for John Holmes**

**24 November 2008:** Somalis who made it through this summer of fighting and hunger are living through one of the lowest points in their country's history. At this time of desperate need, courageous aid workers seeking to alleviate the suffering of Somalis are at great personal risk. Nevertheless, despite the risks, and the bombing in late October of the UN offices in Hargeisa, the humanitarian community will continue to do everything it can to bring Somalis assistance during these darkest hours.

Over the years, Somalis have learned how to fend for themselves in circumstances that most people would find impossible. Through more than two decades of war, fourteen failed peace processes, and successive droughts, Somalis have shown remarkable resilience. But even the most resilient among them need more help now, not less.

The rains, which are the lifeline for the country's agriculture, have failed disastrously in many regions. This is the third year in a row some farmers have watched precious crops shrivel up in parched fields. Their reserves of cash, food, livestock and seeds were used up long ago. Meanwhile, hyperinflation has pushed up the prices of some basic foods and other products by 700 percent in the last year.

These events alone would have been enough to threaten most families, but Somali civilians have also continued to bear the brunt of clashes between the government and its allies, and various anti-government groups. For more than one million Somalis – one in seven people - surviving this latest tragic phase in their country's history has meant abandoning everything and fleeing to one of the displaced people's camps that have sprung up around the country. Some 97,000 of them fled their homes in September alone.

Others have trudged hundreds of kilometers to reach overcrowded refugee camps across the border in Kenya where at least 5,000 new Somali refugees now arrive every month. Tragically, hundreds of men and women are still making the calamitous decision to attempt to cross the Gulf of Aden to Yemen, a journey across open seas in which too many perish.

When the vast scale of this crisis became clear earlier this year, we appealed to the international community for \$646 million to cover emergency needs. So far aid agencies have received \$418 million.

Many donors may be concerned whether their aid will reach those who so desperately need it inside Somalia. Aid workers are being directly targeted by some groups, for reasons hard to comprehend when they are just trying to assist the local population. Unfortunately, we now count Somalia, alongside Afghanistan, as one of the most dangerous places we work in the world.

Tragically, 29 aid workers – mainly Somalis helping their own people – have been killed this year alone. Another 25 aid workers have been kidnapped, 16 of whom are still in captivity somewhere in Somalia.

By targeting aid agencies, the militias are presumably trying to hurt the international community. But the real victims of these attacks are the needy – for example the 35% of Somali children who are suffering from malnutrition, and the thousands among them who die from illnesses aid workers could easily prevent; Somalia's women, more of whom die in childbirth than almost anywhere else in the world; the displaced people huddled together without sanitation or shelter. These terrible attacks by a handful of Somalis are holding the entire country hostage. I appeal once again, with all the conviction I have, that the neutrality and independence of aid workers be respected.

Despite the security situation, we have shown that it is still possible to provide effective assistance. This year, twice as much food aid – enough for 2 million people – was delivered as in the whole of 2007. 80,000 people in Mogadishu are guaranteed at least one hot meal every day. Thousands of displaced children are being kept alive with targeted feeding. These achievements reflect both the determination of Somalis to survive, and the commitment of the aid workers who risk their own lives every day to make a difference.

The point is that the Somali people have not been and will not be abandoned by the international community. Continuing humanitarian assistance, despite the desperately difficult circumstances, is clear evidence of this. Moreover efforts to solve the underlying problems of reconciliation between government and opposition, and to find a generally acceptable way forward, are continuing and have not been derailed by the violence we see every day.

Humanitarian aid to Somalia is not a solution for the country's problems. But it will be a feature of the world's engagement with Somalia so long as it is needed, as long as we can find ways to get it through. If Somalia's people can still find the energy to fight for their own lives, the rest of the world certainly cannot give up either.