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Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UN AND NGO PARTNERS NEED BETTER ACCESS TO DISPLACED SOMALIS

(New York: 20 April 2007): Hundreds of thousands of displaced Somalis are facing a dire humanitarian situation, as humanitarian organizations are unable to deliver sufficient food, water, health, shelter, sanitation and other urgently-needed supplies.

According to aid agencies working in Somalia, urgent improvement in their access to areas around Mogadishu and to key airstrips in south/central Somalia is of paramount importance in order to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

At least 213,000 people have fled Mogadishu since the beginning of February, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with the most recently displaced fleeing north rather than south and west from the capital, as insecurity has prevented their crossing the city. Some field reports indicate that the number of displaced in Somalia may now be as high as 300,000. Many of the displaced have not had adequate food, water or shelter for weeks.

Meanwhile, aid deliveries to south/central Somalia have been hampered by the continued insecurity, including the harassment and detention of aid workers, as well as new bureaucratic regulations imposed by the TFG and lack of access to pre-positioned stocks in Mogadishu. An explosion along the main road from Mogadishu to Afgoye district, where some 40,000 of the displaced are currently living, has effectively closed this vital route.

Compounding the situation, nearly 12,500 cases of acute watery diarrhoea, or cholera, have been confirmed in south/central Somalia since the beginning of the year, including 414 deaths. The incidence of new cases in the areas of Mogadishu, Benadir and Lower Shabelle has been rising since February. The fighting in Mogadishu has further worsened the situation by restricting people's access to clean drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities. Thousands of people displaced in and around the Mogadishu areas are at high risk of infection.

The United Nations and its partners have been working to deliver assistance to those in need, where possible. The World Food Programme and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have delivered over 40,000 metric tonnes of food to internally displaced and other vulnerable populations since the beginning of the year and aim to deliver a further 13,500 tonnes of food in the next three months. The UNHCR yesterday began a distribution of shelter materials for 20,000 people in Afgoye, where most of the displaced have been living rough in the countryside. Additionally, the first inter-agency mission to Kismayo since December 2006 took place yesterday, visiting the hospital and sea port, as well as sites where the displaced have gathered.

Although the latest assessments reflect a drop in the number of Somalis in need of assistance, from 1.8 to 1 million, the country remains chronically food insecure and extremely vulnerable to any shock -- whether conflict- or natural disaster-related. Meanwhile, the rainy season is approaching. The United Nations technical agency, Somalia Water and Land Information Management (SWALIM), has already issued a moderate flood warning for the Shabelle River in south/central Somalia.

To support their activities, the United Nations agencies and humanitarian partners working in Somalia have revised their 2007 appeal upwards to \$262 million. At present, donors have contributed some \$88 million, covering 34 per cent of requirements.

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