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The UN declares famine in Somalia

(Nairobi, 20 July 2011): The United Nations declared today that famine exists in two regions of southern Somalia: southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle. Across the country, nearly half of the Somali population – 3.7 million people – are now in crisis, of whom an estimated 2.8 million people are in the south.

Consecutive droughts have affected the country in the last few years while the ongoing conflict has made it extremely difficult for agencies to operate and access communities in the south of the country.

Famine is declared when acute malnutrition rates among children exceed 30 per cent; more than 2 people per 10,000 die per day; and people are not able to access food and other basic necessities.

Mark Bowden, the Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, warned that malnutrition rates are currently the highest in the world, with peaks of 50 per cent in certain areas of southern Somalia. In southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle, acute malnutrition rates exceed 30 percent, with under-five deaths exceeding 6 per 10,000 per day in some areas. In the last few months, tens of thousands of Somalis have died as a result of causes related to malnutrition, the majority of whom were children.

“If we don’t act now, famine will spread to all eight regions of southern Somalia within two months, due to poor harvests and infectious disease outbreaks,” said Mr. Bowden. “We still do not have all the resources for food, clean water, shelter and health services to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somalis in desperate need,” he continued.

Meanwhile, the lack of resources is alarming. “Every day of delay in assistance is literally a matter of life or death for children and their families in the famine affected areas” Bowden said.

While UN humanitarian agencies have welcomed the recent statement by Al Shabaab requesting international assistance in southern Somalia, the inability of food agencies to work in the region since early 2010 has prevented the UN from reaching the very hungry – especially children – and has contributed to the current crisis.

Despite challenges, humanitarian agencies are working hard to respond. In an effort to reach more children with life-saving interventions, the UN and its partners have scaled up emergency nutrition, water and sanitation, and immunization efforts to combat malnutrition and reduce disease. To expedite the delivery of supplies into the worst-affected areas, the UN has started airlifting urgently needed medical, nutrition and water supplies.

The most affected areas of Somalia are in the south, particularly the region of Lower Shabelle, Middle and Lower Juba, Bay, Bakool, Benadir, Gedo and Hiraaan, which host an estimated 310,000 acutely malnourished children.

Nearly half of the population in Somalia is facing a humanitarian crisis and is in urgent need of assistance. The number of people in crisis has increased by over one million in the last six months. Over 166,000 Somalis have fled the country to seek assistance and refuge in neighbouring countries since the start of the year, with over 100,000 of those fleeing since May. So far in July alone, almost 40,000 new Somali arrivals have been registered in refugee camps in the region.

“More than ever, Somali people need and deserve our full attention. At this time of crisis, we must make exceptional efforts to support Somalis wherever they are in need and expect that all parties will do the same” said Bowden.

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