Large-scale starvation in Somalia and in the Horn of Africa unless the international community steps in, say UN experts

GENEVA – The United Nations Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia, Shamsul Bari, today urged the international community to step up efforts and take immediate concerted measures to address the most severe food crisis in the world today in Somalia.

His call was supported by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, who declared that ten million people in northern Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and South Sudan are at immediate risk of starvation because of the worst regional drought in 60 years.

“I am appalled by the plight of the Somali people who are experiencing the most acute humanitarian tragedy in the world today as a result of the most severe drought in 10 years,” Bari said. “Drastically increasing food prices and continuing conflict and insecurity have caused a huge displacement of the population, with thousands of Somalis fleeing to Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti every day.”

Bari, who last week visited Mogadishu and Nairobi, including the Dadaab Refugee Camps in the Garissa District, said the situation was markedly worse than in March 2011, when he had expressed concerns over the slow response of the humanitarian community to the situation.

“Only 50 per cent of the humanitarian community appeal for US $ 530 million has been funded to cover humanitarian needs of some 2.85 million people or one-third of the Somali population,” Bari said.

“This crisis looks like a natural calamity, but it is in part manufactured,” De Schutter added. “Climate change will result in such events being more frequent. We need emergency food reserves in strategic positions. We need a reform of the Food Aid Convention that imposes on States an obligation to provide support when and where crises emerge. And we need better preparedness for drought, for which Governments must be held to account.”

“It was with shock and great sadness that I heard stories from the new arrivals at the Dadaab refugee camps about the drought and the war,” Bari said. “They told me how they had to walk hundreds of kilometers under the hot sun, carrying young children, to reach humanitarian assistance and to join the Dadaab Refugee camps.”

Bari said it was heartening that there was strong social solidarity in Somali society so
that those who had been displaced did receive hospitality and support from villages they passed through in the course of their perilous journey to the Kenyan border.

In the first half of 2011, the number of people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance increased by almost 850,000 to some 2.85 million people or one third of the population. At least one in three Somali children is malnourished in parts of Southern Somalia. Three in five children arriving in refugee camps in Ethiopia from Southern Somalia are malnourished. In the refugee camps in Kenya, more deaths were recorded amongst Somali children in the therapeutic feeding centres in the first quarter of 2011 than the whole of 2010. Southern areas under Al Shabaab control are hosting up to 80 per cent of the malnourished children.

“Civilians continue to bear the brunt of the fighting,” Bari said. In May alone, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that 1,590 people, with almost half of them children, had been admitted to the three main hospitals in Mogadishu. The percentage of children affected increased from 3.5 percent to 46 per cent from April to May. The WHO attributes this increase to the intensified fighting around the Baakara market, one of the most populated areas in Mogadishu. WHO also reports that the main cause of death among children below the age of five are burns, chest injuries and internal hemorrhages caused by blast injuries, shrapnel and bullets.

“This is an extremely worrying trend and an indicator on how dire the ongoing human rights and humanitarian tragedy is,” Bari said.

“We solemnly appeal to the International community, including the UN, to take concerted and urgent measures to increase access to food, nutrition, clean water and health protection for these very vulnerable people,” the two UN human rights experts concluded. Today, drought affects 3.2 million people in Kenya, 2.6 million in Somalia, 3.2 million in Ethiopia and 117,000 in Djibouti.

"With a rate of child malnutrition above 30% in many regions of these countries, the failure of the international community to act would result in major violations of the right to food,” De Schutter said. "International law imposes on States in a position to help that they do so immediately, where lives are at stake.”

The Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia made his seventh field visit to the Horn of Africa between 4 to 8 July. He visited Mogadishu for the second time this year and was allowed for the first time to go to Villa Somalia to meet the newly appointed Prime Minister of the Transitional Federal Government, H.E. Mr. Abdiweli Mohamed Ali, and members of the outgoing Cabinet. He also visited Kenya/Nairobi, including the Dadaab Refugee Camps in the Garissa District.

END

Dr. Shamsul Bari (Bangladesh) was appointed Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia by the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2008. He is independent from any government or organization and serves in his individual capacity.

Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.

See the Independent Expert’s reports on Somalia:
http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=48
OHCHR Country Page – Somalia:  
http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/SOIndex.aspx

Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur, visit  
http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm or www.srfood.org

For more information and media requests, please contact Mr. Idrissa Kane  
(Tel.: + 41 22 928 9810 / e-mail: ikane@ohchr.org) or write to ie-somalia@ohchr.org