

Somalia's warlords re-emerge

MOGADISHU, Somalia (AP)- Somalia's warlords are re-emerging and pose a threat to humanitarian aid deliveries to the needy, the United Nations warned Wednesday, as the government struggles to quell growing unrest.

Rising violence and a power vacuum caused by the ousting of Islamic forces by the transitional government could lead to a return of the chaos that plagued Somalia for 16 years, the U.N. said in a monthly report.

The spiraling violence is also likely to undermine attempts to deploy an African Union peacekeeping mission designed to protect the country's weak, Ethiopian-backed government and train a new army for the lawless

nation. "The re-emergence of warlords also raises serious concerns about the need to ensure principled humanitarian action and a do-no-harm approach," the U.N. said.

The report warned it was critical to avoid the "coercion and violence" perpetrated by warlords and their militias in the past, as they sought to cash in on aid flowing into the country.

The U.N. estimates around 1 million Somalis need humanitarian aid.

In Mogadishu, the nation's restive capital of 2 million, gunmen are being paid \$2 a day to serve as vigilantes, according to businessmen and residents. Fighting here has killed at least 25

people in the last two weeks. "The government has to take responsibility for security, before they get help from African peacekeepers," said Abdi Mo'ali Husein, a resident who has organized private security efforts.

About 15 private checkpoints have been set up in residential areas and armed militia are being employed by businesses to prevent attacks, according to Ibrahim Omar Sabriye, Mogadishu's deputy mayor.

Mogadishu Police Chief Ali Sa'id Abdi said his officers are working to contain the violence.

Islamic extremists opposed to the government routinely attack official buildings in Mogadishu, as well as

Ethiopian troops deployed here.

In December, Ethiopia sent thousands of soldiers into Somalia to help the U.N.-recognized government defeat an Islamic movement trying to take over the country.

The AU peacekeeping force would replace the Ethiopian soldiers, who are widely despised by Mogadishu residents.

However, it is not clear if the peacekeepers would be welcome, either, after demonstrations over the weekend by Somalis opposed to the expected AU deployment.

The U.N. Security Council is discussing in New York a draft resolution on Somalia, giving its blessing to an AU peacekeeping force that would serve in the country for six months.

Ethiopia had planned to withdraw its forces quickly, although the growing unrest makes a full withdrawal unlikely until at least the arrival of AU troops.

Ethiopian Foreign Affairs Minister Seyoum Mesfin met with Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf on Tuesday in the southern town of Baidoa.

They discussed the worsening security situation and resurgence of resistance groups, said a government official who declined to give his name because he was not authorized to talk to the media.

Somalia has not had an effective national government since 1991, when warlords overthrew dictator Mohamed Siad Barre and then turned on one another, throwing the country into anarchy.

A transitional government was formed in 2004 with U.N. help, but has had little authority because it has no real army or police force.

Zimbabwe's inflation rate is skyrocketing

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) - Huge price increases for bread, electricity and meat drove Zimbabwe's annual inflation rate to 1,593.6 percent, the Central Statistical Office was quoted Tuesday as saying.

The figure for January 2007 represents a 312.5 percent increase on the December rate, the biggest leap in 17 months.

Economists have said there could be hourly price increases in stores by May or June, the Zimbabwe Independent newspaper reported last week.

Zimbabwe has seen run-

away inflation for five years since President Robert Mugabe began seizing thousands of White-owned commercial farms for redistribution to Blacks.

Agricultural production - once Zimbabwe's economic backbone - has dropped 40 percent, and foreign investors have fled as dozens of companies have been forced to close. Unemployment is now more than 70 percent.

The Zimbabwean dollar has plummeted in value in recent weeks, trading now at around 9,550 to the \$1 on the widely used parallel market, more than 38 times the official 250:1 rate set by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

Consumers struggle to keep up with daily price changes for goods, while the government accuses businesses of sabotaging the economy by adjusting prices.

"The month-on-month rate of inflation is now 45.4

percent, following steep increases in rentals and the prices of bread and cereals," the statistics office said in the state-controlled Herald newspaper.

Central bank governor Gideon Gono this month proposed a four-month price and wage freeze starting March 1, but there was little sign that businesses and workers would heed his call.

The Central Statistics Office said that the cost of living had increased by 64.53 percent from December 2006.

A wave of discontent is sweeping through the public. For seven weeks, nurses and doctors have been on strike at four hospitals in the capital, Harare, and in Bulawayo.

A civil servants' union this weekend gave the government until Friday to agree to a 400 percent wage hike for its 180,000 members or face unspecified "action."

Barber

(Continued from Page 16) said. "He's incredibly handsome, he's incredibly charming, he's incredibly personable and he's incredibly smart," he said, "and that's a rare quality."

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