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Public Statement

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Somalia: Fears of resumption of conflict in Mogadishu; 400 civilians killed and thousands fleeing

Amnesty International today condemned the indiscriminate attacks that have taken place in recent days in Mogadishu, resulting in the killing of over 400 civilians. Amnesty International appealed to Somalia's President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, and all armed groups to ensure that their forces strictly abide by international humanitarian law and take all necessary measures to protect civilians.

A tenuous ceasefire has held up since 2 April after four days of heavy fighting, which have led to tens of thousands fleeing the city. Civilians are still fleeing in fear of a resumption of fighting. This latest escalation of conflict has been described as the worst violence for 15 years, after the Somali state collapsed in 1991.

As a result of the conflict in Mogadishu in the past two months, over 100,000 people have fled, including to Somaliland in the northwest and Puntland in the northeast. Reports suggest over 2,000 newly-displaced people have reached Doble and Harehare near the Kenyan border. Mostly women and children, they are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. However, the border has been closed since January because of 'security concerns' on the part of the Kenyan authorities. This has prevented potential asylum-seekers from seeking refuge in Kenya, which is a clear breach of international refugee protection law.

Amnesty International urgently appeals to Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki to re-open the Kenya border and to respect Kenya's obligations under international refugee law. Amnesty International also calls on the Kenya Government to ensure humanitarian agencies have regular cross-border access to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Somalia as an essential humanitarian measure.

An intensive Ethiopian-led military operation in south Mogadishu started on 29 March against armed opponents of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), when a truce negotiated by clan elders collapsed after six days. The TFG had told civilians to leave certain city areas in advance of the operation by TFG police and Ethiopian troops against opponents, whom it claimed were 'terrorists' linked to remnants of the forces of the Council of Somali Islamic Courts defeated in late December 2006.

Heavy fighting ensued for four days, with over 400 civilians, including many women and children, killed in indiscriminate firing by Ethiopian tanks, helicopter gunships and artillery, or by return-fire from opponents armed with rocket-launchers and machine-guns. Over 500 civilians were also wounded, some being treated in the few medical facilities available, but others were left unattended in the streets. Residential areas, a market, a hospital and IDP settlements were among the areas hit by the attacks.

Those risking perilous flight from their homes away from indiscriminate artillery firing have been left destitute without shelter, water or food, and at risk of looting and rape by bandits, or hostility from local clans. Local and international humanitarian agencies have so far been unable to get access to the growing numbers of displaced civilians.