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One million return to Mogadishu

MOGADISHU, 17 July 2012 (IRIN) - Around a million people who fled insecurity and fighting in the Somali capital Mogadishu have returned to the city since August 2011, after the departure of Al-Shabab insurgents, say officials.

"We estimate that about one million people have returned to Mogadishu this year," said Warsame Mohamed Hassan, also known as Jodah, Mogadishu's deputy mayor in charge of security.

Mogadishu's population was estimated at 1.5 million in July 2011 compared to 2.5-3.0 million today, Jodah said.

Some of the returnees are back in their homes, having rebuilt them; others are in temporary shelters in the grounds of their still-ruined residences; others still are in disused government buildings.

Some have returned to find their homes occupied by strangers.

"We fled during the first war in Mogadishu in 1991. We went to Sudan, but later when we returned home, we couldn't go to our house because the people who lived in it did not agree to leave," said Faisa Hassan Ali, a mother of 10 who now lives with her children in a friend's room in the Suqa Xoolaha area of Mogadishu.

"We went to the government and they told us to wait... We are waiting to get back our home."

According to Mogadishu local authorities, at least 80 percent of the properties squatted during the war have been restored to their rightful owners.

The local authorities are standing by to help people reclaim their properties, said Jodah.

Meanwhile, the northern Mogadishu districts of Karan, Shibis and Bondhere, which had previously been empty because of fighting, are now bustling.

Asha Abdillahi Nur, a mother of seven, is among the recent returnees.

"We ran away from Mogadishu in 2006 during the war between Ethiopian forces and [the then ruling Al-Shabab precursor] Union of Islamic Courts, to Elasha Biyaha [in the outskirts of Mogadishu]. We built a house there, but in late May, AMISOM/TFG [African Union Mission to Somalia and Transitional Federal Government] forces clashed with Al-Shabab in Elasha Biyaha and we fled back to Mogadishu... and rented a house," she said.

IDPs on the move

According to an April 2012 UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report, some 14,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned from the Afgoye corridor, a 30-km-long stretch of road.

At the height of the displacement crisis in 2010 the Afgoye corridor was home to an estimated 400,000 Mogadishu residents, according to a 22 June UNHCR statement, with an estimated 120,000 IDPs still living there as of May. Most of the Afgoye IDPs fled fighting in Mogadishu between 2007 and 2010.

While large-scale fighting ended in the city in August 2011, other factors - the declaration of famine in July 2011, insecurity in the Afgoye corridor, as well as the scale-up of humanitarian assistance in Mogadishu - have prompted people to return, says UNHCR.

A July UNHCR report on IDP population estimates said there were about 184,000 IDPs in Mogadishu, though UNHCR also said: "Continuing insecurity in Somalia, multiple displacements and lack of access, make efforts to estimate the IDP population extremely challenging."

Rapes

Despite the improved security situation, sexual violence, bombings and assassinations continue.

"We believe hundreds of rapes are taking place in Mogadishu per month," said Dunia Mohamed Arab, chairman of one of the local NGOs working on gender-based violence in Mogadishu. Most rape victims are females aged 15-25, she said.

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SOMALIA: Thousands flee to Mogadishu after Afgoye fighting "Some of the rapes are committed by IDPs and some by men wearing the uniform of government forces. Most of the rapes happen near alcohol-selling centres in IDP camps, or near police checkpoints in the camps."

But according to TFG Minister for Women and Family Development Maryan Aweis Jama, the number of rape cases has decreased in the last three months compared to the start of 2012.

While 39-45 cases of rape were reported per month between January and February, 17-29 cases were recorded between March and June, she said.

"Of course there are some security incidents in Mogadishu, but that does not mean Mogadishu is not secure, said Jodah.

"Even though there are some incidents of insecurity, such as bombings and assassinations... the people of Mogadishu are now returning their original homes with high hopes," said a police official who preferred anonymity.

Lack of skilled labour

Amid renewed hope, new buildings are coming up in Mogadishu although there is a lack of adequate skilled labour - most masons having fled to places like Gal-Mudug, Puntland, Somaliland and Djibouti.

To fill the gap, the TFG is calling for the setting up of vocational training schools. "We believe that only 10,000 skilled workers returned to Mogadishu [in addition to] 20,000 who were in the town during the war. But due to the high demand in the town, these numbers are not enough," said Aweys Sheikh Hadaad, director-general of the Ministry of Labour, Sports and Social Affairs.

"These schools can contribute [to] the security of the town. For example, we believe 90 percent of people are unemployed." Security could be improved by giving these people jobs or training, he added.

Mogadishu, like most of south-central Somalia, has experienced over two decades of insecurity due to clan-based war resulting in deaths and massive displacement.

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