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When bullets tore through the streets of Kismayo in June, leaving over 70 dead as rival militias twice fought for control of the Somali port city, many international aid agencies halted a cautious scale-up of activities.

One of the few to stay was the World Health Organization (WHO).

"For us, conflict means casualties. We are doctors; we have to be there," Omar Saleh, WHO Somalia's emergency health coordinator, told IRIN.

But for most international organizations - many of which had just returned to Kismayo after militant Islamists Al-Shabab were driven out late last year - the June violence proved too dangerous.

As stability returned through July, activities slowly resumed. Still, the political and security crises that fuelled the fighting are at risk of deepening.

Jubaland issue

The recent disputes over Jubaland, a state-within-a-state whose leadership and borders are not recognized by the administration in Mogadishu, constitute a test of federal principles outlined in Somalia's provisional constitution. The central government also seeks control of and revenue from Kismayo, Jubaland's de facto capital.

Jubaland, which, in its maximum extent, is considered to include the regions of Gedo and Lower and Middle Juba, has 87,000sqkm of mainly fertile land and some 1.3 million people of many different clan allegiances.

Timeline of "Jubaland" disputes

2009-2010 - First discussions of the "Jubaland Initiative", with local elites and, in part, Kenya identified as the key proponents of the plan to train anti-Al-Shabab militia and establish a regional administration in areas of Somalia bordering Kenya.

April 2011 - Former Somali Defence Minister Mohamed Abdi Mohamed forms Azania group, and is declared president of Azania, another term for the Jubaland region.

October 2011 - Kenya launches incursion into Somalia - Operation Linda Nchi - deploying some 2,000 troops across the border.

May 2012 - Nairobi-based talks charge 32-member technical committee with establishing a Jubaland administration.

August 2012 - Internationally recognized federal administration replaces Transitional Federal Government, not long after constituent assembly backs provisional constitution that outlines federal principles.

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September 2012 - Kenyan and Somali troops - partly operating under AMISOM umbrella - seize control of Kismayo from Al-Shabab, with support from the Ras Kamboni militia.

February 2013 - First Jubaland conference held in Kismayo; flag and three-year constitution adopted.

May 2013 - 500-strong conference of clan elders and local leaders elect former warlord and leader of Ras Kamboni militia Ahmed Madobe as "president" of Jubaland, a move opposed by the central government in Mogadishu. Following separate conference, former warlord and Defence Minister Col Barre Hiraale also declares himself "president" of the region. Violent clashes subsequently break out in streets of Kismayo.

July 2013 - Letter from Somali foreign minister to African Union leaked, describing "incompetence" of Kenyans and calling for deployment of "multinational" AU force to the city.

August 2013 - Communiqué issued by regional leaders at Kampala Summit demands that control of Kismayo's airport and seaport be handed back to the federal government. The Jubaland issue is also complicating relations between the central government in Mogadishu, regional powers Kenya and Ethiopia, and the African Union (AU) mission in Somalia (AMISOM). And with key players in Kismayo temporarily distracted, the crisis could be giving Al-Shabab a much-needed breather to regroup.

These developments threaten gains made this year by aid agencies and risk extending an already complex humanitarian situation in the city, where 60,000 people are in need of aid, according to estimates by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

"Whenever territory is taken by military operations, there is at least a temporary lag setting up a functioning administration. This hampers the ability of humanitarians to access people in need," Philippe Lazzarini, the UN's top humanitarian official for Somalia, told IRIN.

"The change in power can stoke insecurity rooted in competition among rival factions, as we saw in Kismayo and the Juba regions," he added.

Many years under pressure

For several years, Kismayo, 200km north of the Kenyan border, was a key stronghold and source of income for Al-Shabab. The militants took control of the city in August 2008, after defeating the militia of Barre Adan Shire (widely known as Hiiraale), and remained in control of it until their defeat in September 2012.

Kismayo was a key target in AMISOM's operation against Al-Shabab - the militants controlled the lucrative charcoal trade out of the port and also taxed imported goods.

While civilians report some stability during Al-Shabab's control of the city, there were also limited livelihood opportunities, and access to education and healthcare was often difficult. Al-Shabab also banned polio vaccination in Kismayo and elsewhere in south-central Somalia, and according to reports, the group forcibly taxed and recruited the city's residents.

"Conditions for the population were so precarious under Al-Shabab," Soldan Haji Aden, director of the Alikar Center for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy in Kismayo, told IRIN. "Residents and internally displaced persons [IDPs] who came to Kismayo could not find healthcare, water, food, shelter or some kind of livelihood."

Kismayo and the surrounding region were also hit hard by the 2011 food crisis. While famine was not declared in Lower Juba, the situation was classified a humanitarian emergency. Many of those displaced by the food crisis crossed the border to go to the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, but tens of thousands of people fled to Kismayo, where many other IDPs have gathered since the early 1990s.

"When Al-Shabab controlled Kismayo, it was very difficult to get food to feed my family," Fadumo el Moge, a mother of five in Kismayo, told IRIN. "There was no work and Al-Shabab controlled the city and stopped humanitarian assistance. I had to rely on support from my family abroad."

Glimmer of hope, but serious problems

Kenyan and Somali troops - the former mostly operating as part of the AU mission - attacked Kismayo in September 2012. Supported by local militia Ras Kamboni, the mixed force launched a combined ground, air and naval assault on 28 September and quickly ousted the militants from their last major urban stronghold.

While there remain major concerns about access and security, UN agencies and NGOs have launched or extended a variety of programmes, directly or through partners. Several have sent in short missions involving international staff, and humanitarian needs assessments have also been carried out.

"The challenges in Kismayo largely mirror those found throughout southern and central Somalia," Lazzarini - who made his first visit to Kismayo as Humanitarian Coordinator in July 2013 - told IRIN. "People lack sufficient health services. They need clean water, sanitation services and education."

Key humanitarian risks include the possibility of a polio outbreak taking hold given the long ban on vaccination, the spread of waterborne and infectious diseases within densely populated urban areas and IDP camps, and the ongoing threat of conflict in the city and beyond.

"The situation in Kismayo is better than before," said Saleh of WHO, which is running polio vaccination and emergency surgery programmes. "But there are major problems. Kismayo Hospital needs total renovation. We need to establish long logistic lines for supplies and medicine and build up the people who are there after so much capacity has been lost. We are progressing, however, slowly but surely."

The World Food Programme (WFP) launched two basic programmes in January through local partners: wet feeding at five centres, reaching about 15,000 people each day, and a nutrition programme to treat high levels of malnutrition among women and young children.

Médécins Sans Frontières - which withdrew from Kismayo in 2008 after the murder of three staff members - was also active in the city, but it recently announced plans to close all of its Somalia programmes due to "extreme attacks" on its staff. A number of other agencies are present, but are reluctant to share details of their operations.

Recent setbacks

Kismayo's uneasy peace was shattered in June, when fighting broke out between rival militias laying claim to the presidency of Jubaland. The violence underscored the fragility of Kismayo's early recovery and the dangers that remain.

"The tensions have been a setback - in particular, the fighting on 28-30 June, which resulted in more than 70 deaths and hundreds of civilian casualties," said Lazzarini.

Clashes first broke out in early June and then again at the end of the month, with rival factions battling for control of the city. WHO reported a 44 percent rise in weapons-related injuries in Kismayo in June. The fighting pitted Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe" - who was elected president of Jubaland in May by a conference of clan representatives - and his Ras Kamboni militia against other figures who also declared themselves leaders of the region.

Human Rights Watch criticized the militias for disregarding the safety of civilians, while a leaked letter from Somali Foreign Minister Fawzia Yusuf to the AU accused the Kenyan military of backing Ras Kamboni in the June clashes and of using heavy weapons in civilian areas. Analysts say Kenya has been encouraging the creation of Jubaland, which could act as a buffer zone on its northern border.

On 4 August 2013, in Uganda's capital, Kampala, regional heads of state decided in a communique that control of Kismayo's airport and seaport should be handed back to the Federal Government - backing Mogadishu against Madobe.

But the violence had already taken its toll. A critical polio vaccination campaign, which targeted tens of thousands of at-risk children, was halted. Although the effort was restarted in July, the delay is concerning given the 100 cases of polio confirmed in Somalia in 2013.

WFP's food distribution activities were also disrupted, threatening recent gains in food security since the 2011 crisis. "The port has largely been inaccessible, so for essentially two months we couldn't get food there," Challiss McDonough, WFP's spokesperson, told IRIN. "We did an exchange with another organization but had to suspend cooked meals in late July. We are in the process of getting more food there and hope to be able to resume by mid-August."

The instability in Kismayo also threatens hopes of early refugee repatriation from Kenya. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), some 96,000 refugees in Dadaab - representing over 35 percent of the camp's population - have origins in Lower Juba and are unlikely to agree to any negotiated return while significant violence still threatens the region's capital and civilian population.

Despite the negative humanitarian outlook following June's violence, some agencies remain upbeat.

"The local authorities told me that they are ready to ensure the security of humanitarian workers," said Lazzarini. "We are redeploying staff... We will continue to work hard to scale-up our activities, not only in Kismayo but throughout southern Somalia."

OCHA recognizes that the situation in the city "remains tense", and as MSF's recent withdrawal from the country demonstrates, the conditions for humanitarian activity in Kismayo and elsewhere will likely remain precarious for some time

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