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Security downturn in Mogadishu

MOGADISHU, 9 April 2014 (IRIN) - Three years after Al-Shabab insurgents withdrew from the city, security in Mogadishu remains a serious problem for residents and aid workers, with threats from Al-Shabab incursions, criminals and militia.

Often-deadly attacks attributed to Al Shabab or its sympathizers involving mortar rounds, rocket propelled grenades and improvised explosive devices occur with great frequency in the capital.

Some 624 weapons-related casualties were treated in four hospitals in Mogadishu in January and February, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) February Humanitarian Bulletin, a 20 percent increase on the previous two months.

Recent months have also seen a flurry of terror attacks against key government and international organizations in the city. On 21 February the presidential palace was attacked and senior government officials killed. A week earlier a UN convoy was targeted, leaving six dead.

“In Mogadishu, the security situation has deteriorated since... December,” Nicholas Kay, the Secretary-General’s special representative to Somalia, told the UN Security Council on 11 March. “Times are tough, and in the short term they may get tougher. Insecurity in Mogadishu poses challenges for Somalis, for the UN and the international community.”

“The risk of further attacks against Somali government and international targets remains high,” he added.

Fear

For many Mogadishu residents, fear of attack and crime prevents them from leading normal lives. Neighbourhoods such as Heliwaa, Yaqshiid and Dayniile have been particularly hard-hit, forcing people to flee to more peaceful districts within the city.

“The latest face-to-face clashes between Somali government troops and Al-Shabab have badly affected our way of life and many people lost their lives. In this place nobody rules, so residents live under constant fear,” one resident of Heliwaa who preferred anonymity told IRIN. “I never thought that this sort of thing could be happening three years after Al-Shabab was defeated militarily.”

Security fears are forcing businesses to close at 4pm, and also affecting rents.

“Here [in Heliwaa] the cost of rent of [a] five-room villa is US\$35-70 depending on the condition of

the house. However, in more peaceful areas the rent is expensive. For example, a five-room home in Waberi is \$300-400,” he said. “Some of my neighbours fled but we are just staying behind for financial reasons.”

But across the city, people don’t feel safe. “Rarely a night passes without a phone being robbed at gunpoint,” English teacher Ahmed Aden Ibrahim, who lives in the Hamarjadid neighbourhood, told IRIN.

Inept government, security forces

Abdullahi Adan Hussein, a security analyst and former colonel in the Somali army, told IRIN political infighting within the administration was to blame for the deterioration in security.

“The predecessors of the current administration had enough time to understand the psychology of their enemies and respond accordingly, but they were replaced by the current government,” he said. “The new guys needed more time to adapt to the new situation. However, the Council of Ministers lost confidence and a security gap was created.”

“There is a real continuity problem. Al-Shabab exploited the status quo and launched these daring attacks,” he added.

Amnesty International also blamed the security forces. “Lack of discipline and command control within Somalia’s armed forces and allied armed groups means that they not only fail to provide civilian protection, but are actually contributing to the overall insecurity,” it noted in a press release. “State security forces continue to be infiltrated by criminal, radical or insurgent elements,” it said.

Many of the capital’s 17 districts have their own armed militia under the authority of that district’s commissioner. In many cases these groups operate as private armies whose loyalty to the central government varies.

Abdinasir Hashi Jimale, a Mogadishu-based political analyst, believes the attack on Villa Somalia (theoretically the country’s most protected building) was aimed at demonstrating just how vulnerable the government remains.

“The presidential palace is the country’s symbol and it seems Al Shabab wants to send a loud message: ‘We are still here and we can strike you any time,’” he said.

Al Shabab has already targeted UN installations and personnel - most notably in July 2013, when the UN compound in Mogadishu was attacked and has recently declared some NGOs as enemies, although none have been attacked by the insurgent group.

“To bring a degree of confidence and stability, the government has to undertake a number of

important measures such as adopting more inclusive politics that bring all clans on board, because shift of clan loyalty has the potential to reverse government gains; it should also nominate competent officials for the top security posts, provide good pay for the soldiers and build a working justice system,” Jimale added.

The humanitarian community is particularly affected by the insecurity, which besides Al Shabab attacks includes various crimes - muggings, extortion at checkpoints, kidnapping, and the diversion of aid.

Foreign UN personnel are largely confined to a base at the airport and international aid workers generally require protection when travelling around the capital.

“The fact that we have to go around with armed escorts undermines the principles of ‘do no harm’ and ‘neutrality’,” one foreign aid worker who asked not to be named told IRIN.

All this reduces access to people in need and greatly increases the cost of humanitarian operations, notably for the 370,000 internally displaced people in Mogadishu.