

World forgetting Somalia, says church aid alliance

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Somalia is a "prime example" of an emergency the world has forgotten, says the ACT Alliance of churches and humanitarian agencies.

"With 1.5 million people—just under 10 percent of its population—forced from their homes by fighting, aid relief inside the country remains critical," the Geneva-headquartered alliance said on August 6. It noted that at least another 600,000 Somalis are refugees, living mainly in Kenya, Yemen and Ethiopia.

The statement came in advance of plans by ACT members in Somalia to issue a fresh appeal to provide basic services to displaced people in the country and to refugees in neighboring nations.

After Afghanistan and Iraq, Somalia generates the world's highest number of refugees. Somalis are fleeing conflict, economic collapse and drought, according to the UNHCR, the United Nations' refugee agency.

Many civilians were killed or wounded in fighting in Mogadishu in late July. At the same time, the African Union said it would add 4,000 troops to its peace force in Somalia, which is trying to keep the Western-backed government from being toppled by insurgent rebels.

A Somali Islamist group, al-Shabaab, has said it was behind two blasts on July 11 that killed more than 70 people in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, to protest against the presence of peacekeepers from that country in Somalia.

The ACT Alliance noted that since 1991 clashes between Somali ethnic groups have resulted in the death of many and caused immeasurable economic and social destruction. Mortar fire and weaponry have left thousands of people disabled and living in desperate situations. A third of Somalis survive on what little they receive from relatives.

"Violence and insecurity in south and central Somalia have considerably reduced the regions aid agencies can work [in], compelling them to move or evacuate international workers to safer places," ACT said. "Kidnappings of aid workers, followed by ransom demands, are major obstacles to humanitarian operations in Somalia."

In a report from Nairobi, Kenya, a Somali pastor in exile said that three relief agencies in his country—World Vision, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, and Diakonia, a Swedish agency—on August 8 were ordered by al-Shabaab militants to cease operations.

Pastor Ahmed Abukar Mukhtar, the leader of a small Christian community in Somalia, said he believes that the militants' charges of proselytizing "under the guise of humanitarian work" by the Christian agencies were untrue.

World Vision officials said August 9 that the keys to its offices and assets of the staff were taken by al-Shabaab, forcing the mission to suspend its charitable work temporarily. "World Vision is surprised and disappointed by the move," a statement said. A spokesperson said the agency is "a signatory to the Red Cross code of conduct that guarantees impartiality in our distribution of aid." —ENI