

TheNational

Somalia's civil war puts strain on Kenya

Matt Brown, Foreign Correspondent

- Last Updated: June 20. 2008 1:50AM UAE / June 19. 2008 9:50PM GMT



Antonio Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, talks to Somali refugees at the Dadaab refugee camp. AP

DADAAB, Kenya // It took Aden Abdule 18 days travelling by donkey cart to escape the fighting in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, and cross the border into Kenya.

Mr Abdule, who worked loading produce on to lorries bound for market, decided it was time to flee after Islamic militants raided his house, killed two of his nine children and shot him in the leg.

He gathered his family and what few possessions the militants did not loot and joined the exodus of Somalis leaving the capital. Along the way, Mr Abdule's wounded leg became infected and a village doctor hacked it off with a rusty saw.

"That journey had a lot of problems," he said. "I don't want to go back to Somalia. It is only sadness when I remember what happened."

Mr Abdule and his family crossed into Kenya two months ago. They now live in a tent in one of three sprawling Somali refugee camps 80km from the border. Mr Abdule is one of thousands of Somalis who have fled the recent fighting in their country in the past few months.

The camps in north-west Kenya already hold about 200,000 refugees from Somalia's 17-year civil war. They are growing by the day, and officials are struggling to provide

services to the 4,000 Somalis who cross the border each month.

"We need to do something to reduce the congestion," Antonio Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said during a visit to the camps. "There are too many people living in a small area. We need to improve the living conditions for the Somalis until peace allows them to go back."

Mr Guterres is in Kenya to mark World Refugee Day, which is today, and to highlight the humanitarian crisis in Somalia, which he described as "one of the worst" in the world.

The refugees have built a city out of sticks and UN tarpaulins here in the sandy scrub brush of Kenya's frontier region - a landscape so barren it is normally only sparsely populated by semi-nomadic camel herders.

Kenya has hosted Somali refugees since Siad Barre, the former Somali dictator, was overthrown by warlords in 1991 sparking a civil war. In 2007, Ethiopian-backed Somali forces ousted the Islamic Courts Union, a group of Islamists that briefly ruled the country. Islamic militants have waged a guerrilla war for the past 18 months, terrorising Somalis and causing the recent mass movement of refugees.

The Kenyan government officially closed the border once the recent fighting started, although Somalis have still managed to cross the porous frontier to the relative safety of the refugee camps.

"It's better here in the camps," said Fatuma Abdirahman, a mother of six who arrived two months ago. "Here we don't have any fighting. We are comfortable. The problem is people can't work for themselves."

Many of the refugees have become reliant on UN food aid. Some have been in the camps for 17 years. They feel trapped, unable to travel within Kenya and too afraid to return to Somalia.

At the camp hospital, James Ndirangu treats new refugees who have arrived with markings of the war - gunshot wounds, shrapnel embedded in flesh and missing limbs from roadside bombs. But the main problems he treats are mental.

"Many people here have post traumatic stress disorder," he said. "They are coming across with stories of a lot of fighting. Many of the women have been raped."

Malnutrition is also increasing in the camps, Dr Ndirangu said, adding that one to two children die of malnutrition each month.

The 60,000 children in the camps are placed into 25 crowded schools run by CARE International, an aid organisation. The new arrivals are placed with other refugee children who have lived their whole lives in the camps.

Mohammed Ahmed Ali arrived two months ago. He is 15, but he is in primary school with much younger students who have lived in the camp longer. At least here he is able to get an education, he said.

"We can't learn in Somalia because of the fighting," he said. "I could not concentrate because of the situation there. Here there is peace and we have good teachers."

Some of the newly arrived children said their friends were forcibly recruited into Somali militias. Aid workers are worried that restless youth, who have finished their studies but cannot work in the camps, may be compelled to return to Somalia and take up a gun.

"If the youth are not taken care of, they are at risk of joining the militias and going to war," said Francesca Bonelli, a community services officer for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

As the world turns its attention to conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Darfur, Somalia is quietly becoming the worst humanitarian crisis on the planet. Many aid organisations have abandoned operations inside Somalia because of the security risk as the fighting continues to rage. Only the lucky Somalis who make it across the border are given food and shelter.

Armiye Omar is one of those who made it. He fled Mogadishu during recent hectic street fighting between militants and government troops. In the chaos, Mr Omar was separated from his wife and four children and has not heard from them since.

"I worry about how my family is doing," he said standing in the hot orange sand in front of the small one-person stick hut where he tries to sleep. "I don't sleep at night. I worry that one day I will get information that they have died."

mbrown@thenational.ae