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**Guterres warns of possible large-scale displacement in Somalia**

GENEVA -- UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres expressed deep concern Tuesday over the worsening conflict in Somalia, warning that further displacement in the Horn of Africa could severely strain already overstretched relief efforts.

Recent fighting between Ethiopian forces aligned with the Somali Transitional Federal Government and the Islamic Courts Union is reportedly causing the displacement of thousands of civilians in central and southern Somalia.

"Somalia has been affected over the past several months by one crisis after another," Guterres said. "Early in the year it was drought. That was followed by internal conflict that sent more than 34,000 refugees to our camps in Dadaab, Kenya. Then, since November, we've seen heavy flooding over a wide area of southern Somalia, and now over the past week, extremely serious fighting.

"I appeal to all sides in this conflict to respect humanitarian principles and protect civilian populations," he continued. "Relief workers in the region are already struggling to contend with huge obstacles, including security and natural disasters. The last thing we and the people of Somalia need is yet another round of massive displacement."

UNHCR staff in Kenya, Ethiopia and across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen are monitoring the situation for any increase in border movements. So far, nothing sizeable has been reported in neighbouring countries. But there are reports of several thousand people on the move within Somalia itself.

Fighting earlier this year between the Islamic Courts Union and various warlords sent some 34,000 Somalis fleeing to Kenya. The influx largely halted in mid-November when floods inundated much of southern Somalia and northern Kenya, where UNHCR operates three sprawling refugee camps at Dadaab that together house some 160,000 refugees – most of them Somalis.

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