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Somalia OKs Humanitarian Flights

By The Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — Shortly after wresting control of Somalia's capital from Islamic militants, the U.N.-backed transitional government Thursday approved the immediate resumption of humanitarian flights.

Fighting earlier this week between the Islamic militia and Ethiopian forces backing the Somali government forced the United Nations to evacuate its international staff and halt assistance to 2 million people in south and central regions affected by the conflict and recent floods.

Government troops rolled into Mogadishu unopposed Thursday. Islamic fighters fled south vowing to continue the battle.

"Their airspace has been declared open, which means that we and others can fly in," said Stephanie Bunker, spokeswoman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, known as OCHA.

"The U.N. will first do a security assessment of the situation, which is standard procedure," she said. "Once we've done that—and we don't yet know when that will be—we will resume our flights if it's safe enough to do so."

The U.N. plan is to resume cargo and passenger flights to the southern port of Kismayo to reach flood-affected areas, and to other locations to quickly reach thousands displaced by the fighting, OCHA said.

"The U.N. aid operation is trying to save as many lives as possible as quickly as possible," said Margareta Wahlstrom, the acting U.N. emergency relief coordinator. "To that end, we need adequate security for both civilians in need and for humanitarian staff who are there to help them."

The latest violence in Somalia has sent thousands of Somalis fleeing for safety. The country was also beset first by a drought that wiped out most of its crops and livestock in late 2005 and early 2006, and then by flooding since September.

The floods have displaced almost half a million Somalis, destroyed tens of thousands of homes and submerged some 100,000 hectares of land, according to OCHA.

OCHA said there has been "significant internal displacement" in Somalia since the fighting started, but no large-scale influx of Somali refugees into Kenya.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees is mobilizing staff and resources in case of an influx of refugees into northeastern Kenya.

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