

Antecedents of the Crisis



SOMALIA has swayed from crisis to crisis since 1991, when the central government fell. In 1992, the same elements of drought and war set off a famine that killed hundreds of thousands of people and started a cycle of international intervention that, despite billions of dollars and more than a dozen transitional governments, has yet to stabilize the country. Today, pastures have dried up, and the animals that Somali nomads survive off of are dying in large amounts. Food prices are escalating, and after 20 years of anarchy, coping mechanisms are collapsing, with many families driven from their land and many breadwinners cut down in Somalia's endless attempts at civil war. Many of those who can are fleeing the country. Thousands of Somalis have been streaming across the borders of Kenya and Ethiopia every day, and many children arrive too far gone to be saved.

In the past 20 years, only a handful of humanitarian emergencies have qualified as famines, including Sudan in 1998, Ethiopia in 2001 and Niger in 2005. According to the United Nations, a famine is declared when "acute malnutrition rates among children exceed 30 percent, more than 2 people per 10,000 die per day, and people are not able to access food and other basic necessities." That is now the case in two regions of southern Somalia, southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle, both controlled by the militant group al Shabab. But throughout the country people are on the edge of running out of food. Not shockingly, the famine was neither sudden nor a surprise. Last year, weather forecasts financed by the American government predicted dangerously low rainfall in many areas of the Horn of Africa.

Famine in the Mist of the Global Food Crisis

Analysis by FEWSNET/USGS indicate that since the last quarter of 2010, most pastoral zones in the Eastern Horn of Africa experienced the worst drought in decades since 1950-51. In addition, the region has experienced two consecutive seasons of significantly below-average

rainfall with far reaching socio-economic implications that include failed crop production (hence, reduced food access), significantly high livestock mortality, acute malnutrition, lack of water, mass migration, and high human mortality rates among others.

This situation coupled with the effects of the global food crisis, is likely to represent the most serious food insecurity situation in the world today, in terms of both scale and severity. Current humanitarian response is inadequate to meet emergency needs. Assuming current levels of response, evidence suggests that famine across all regions of the south of Somalia will occur in the coming 1-2 months. A massive multisectoral response is critical to prevent additional deaths and total social collapse, and most immediately, interventions to improve food access and to address health issues are much needed.

Deaths and Casualties

According to the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), population-wide death rates are above the famine threshold (2 people per every 10,000 die per day) in two areas (Bakool agropastoral, and all areas of Lower Shabelle) and are elevated across the south. Under-5 death rates are even higher (on average 4 people per every 10,000 die per day) in all areas of the south where data is available, peaking at 13 to 20 deaths per every 10,000 people per day in riverine and agropastoral areas of Lower Shabelle. Tens of thousands of people have died in the past three months. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) warned on Sunday, July 17th, 2011 that malnutrition in Somalia reached the highest in the world, which means that one in 10 children is at risk of dying from fatigue. The Red Cross committee said that even in traditionally agricultural areas of the African country nearly 11 percent of children under five are at risk of starvation.

Humanitarian Action of the United Nations

Thousands of Somalis arrive daily at the UN refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia due to the famine they are suffering as a result of the strong drought in Somalia, the worst in 60 years. The United Nations delivered five tons of food and medicine supplies to assist malnourished children. Since early July, about 11,000 people have arrived in Ethiopia and more than 8,600 to Kenya. The average of daily arrivals in Ethiopia and Kenya is around 1,700 and 1,300 people, respectively, said UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Antonio Guterres. The week of July 12th, 2011, the UN formally launched a calling to donors for 136.6 millions of dollars to meet emergency needs in the Horn of Africa, which is heavily affected by the severe climate change.

Worst Aspects of the Production Situation

The total failure of the October-December Deyr rains (secondary season) and the poor performance of the April-June Gu rains (primary season) have resulted in crop failure, reduced labor demand, poor livestock body conditions, and excess animal mortality. Local cereal prices across the south are far above average, more than 2 to 3 times 2010 prices in some areas, and continue to rise. As a result, both livestock to cereal and wage to cereal terms of trade have deteriorated substantially. Across all livelihoods, poor households (about 30 percent of the population) are unable to meet basic food needs and have limited ability to cope with these food deficits.

The current price inflation is due to, in addition to poor seasonal rain, depleting grain stocks in domestic markets, high demand, and accelerating retail prices of fuel. Thus, with an imminent poor seasonal crop production, prices are not expected to slow down in the short-run. Johnnie Carson, the assistant secretary for African affairs at the State Department, said the American government was trying to alleviate the longstanding cycles of droughts and famines with a program called "Feed the Future", which intends to raise agricultural productivity and help "populations in adapting to increasing erratic weather patterns." However, local support and implementation has been low.

Worst Points of the Security Situation

The Islamist militants who forced Western aid organizations out of Somalia last year, right as the drought was looming, are now urging the groups to return. But aid officials are wary, citing the dozens of workers who have been killed in Somalia in recent years. Also hindering the emergency efforts, aid officials argue, are American government rules that prohibit material support to the militants, who often demand “taxes” for allowing aid deliveries to pass through. The effects of the drought are only getting worse due to the ongoing political and security instability in Somalia. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and allied militias are currently engaged in a campaign to wrest control of Southern Somalia from Islamic insurgent group al Shabab. If international aid does not reach the affected population soon, famine will only continue to spread and the food/humanitarian crisis will most definitely worsen. UN’s Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, said on July 22nd, 2011, that “we can’t allow Somalia to starve”

More Information:

- <http://www.fsnau.org/>
- http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/21/world/africa/21somalia.html?_r=1
- <http://www.pravdaliberation.com.ar/2011/07/urgente-africa-miles-de-somalies-huyen.html>

By Jatnna Garcia, CDRI Intern