

A Diplomatic Surge to Stop Somalia's Famine

Enough Policy Briefing

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Somalia is dying. Three-quarters of a million people are at immediate risk of famine; another 750,000 are refugees in neighboring countries, and 4 million – half the total population – is in need of emergency aid. It is a calamity that could join the ranks of the Rwanda genocide and the Darfur crisis in terms of scale and human suffering. And for Somalia it is a terrible repeat of the 1991-92 famine that claimed 240,000 lives.

The international response to date has been shockingly inadequate – not just because funds for humanitarian aid have fallen short, but because of the absence of political will to take bold diplomatic action to remove impediments to the delivery of aid.

Unless this changes, the 2011 Somali famine will be to the Obama administration what the 1994 Rwandan genocide was to the Clinton administration – a terrible stain, an unforgivable instance of lack of political will to push policy beyond incrementalism. And for the Islamic world, al-Shabaab's role in the Somali famine will be remembered as the Islamic Khmer Rouge, in which an armed group with a deeply twisted interpretation of the faith presides over the mass deaths of its own people.

The core of the problem is this: Aid agencies have very limited access to famine victims and very limited capacity to monitor food aid deliveries. In the countryside, where 70 percent of the famine victims live, the jihadist group al-Shabaab blocks most aid agencies and severely curtails the activities of the few that remain. Its leadership has denied that famine exists, views food aid as a Western conspiracy to undermine Somali farmers, and tries to block famine victims from fleeing to areas where food aid is available. The aid that does manage to get to Shabaab-controlled areas, through delicate bi-lateral negotiations by individual aid agencies, is not nearly enough.

Areas controlled by the Somali allies of the U.S. government and the United Nations are little better. In the capital Mogadishu, where famine victims are piling into inter-



nally displaced persons camps, paramilitaries nominally affiliated with the U.N.-backed Transitional Federal Government, or TFG, divert food aid, prey on famine victims, and fight among themselves. Rival politicians are setting up their own camps to use as bait for food aid, which they can then divert. No famine is complete without vultures.

In consequence, the bulk of international relief efforts operate on the edges of the crisis, especially in the burgeoning refugee camps on the Kenyan-Somali border, which have now grown to an astonishing 470,000 refugees. This is not a famine relief strategy – it is a macabre game of “Survivor,” rewarding those lucky and strong enough to straggle across the border with a prize of shelter, food rations, and the prospect of being warehoused in a refugee camp for the next 20 years.

We can – and must – do better.

It is already too late for some of the famine victims, mainly children, who are now so malnourished and weak that they will succumb in large numbers to the outbreak of diseases like cholera that are about to sweep through southern Somalia with the onset of the short rainy season in coming weeks. This is an agonizing admission for humanitarian agencies to make. But the world does still have time to reach southern Somali popula-

The sprawling outskirts of Dagahaley refugee camp in Kenya's Dadaab refugee complex. With so many new arrivals to already-full Dadaab, people are forced to pitch tents and construct makeshift huts on the edges of the camp, where there is no infrastructure nor basic services, such as water. Courtesy of Phil Moore (www.philmoore.info/photography)

tions with food and medical aid to significantly reduce fatalities between now and the main harvest in June. Since we cannot reach most of the 750,000 people at immediate risk of famine, because of the criminal negligence of local political authorities, it is time to invoke the U.N.-endorsed doctrine known as the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P.

R2P is an evolving norm that sets out very specific conditions which, when met, call on the international community to intervene to save lives where casualties will be massive and where local authorities cannot or will not protect their own citizens. R2P is often misunderstood to be a call for armed humanitarian intervention, but the doctrine actually envisions a range of non-military options before military force is considered.

This ball is already in play. Neighboring states Ethiopia and Kenya have already called for military action to create humanitarian corridors to reach famine victims, and there are also rumors of discussions in some quarters for armed intervention led by Islamic countries. But Somalia has already had its share of foreign military interventions, and they have not had happy endings, including an ill-fated Ethiopian military occupation in 2007 and 2008 which helped fuel the ascent of Shabaab. A military intervention into the famine zone now could throw southern Somalia into even more turmoil and make things worse. At any rate, it is not the best of bad options at this point in time. As a matter of principle, it is also important that humanitarian access not be used as a pretext for other motives – in this case a desire by regional and international actors to defeat Shabaab. And calls to expand the mandate of the African Union peacekeeping force currently protecting the TFG to allow it to provide protection for humanitarian aid are misguided. AMISOM lacks the capacity to play such a role even in Mogadishu, much less in the Shabaab-controlled interior of the country.

For those uneasy with the unpalatable choice between regional military intervention or acceptance of the grisly status quo, there is an alternative: invocation of the Responsibility to Protect to mobilize unrelenting, full-scale diplomatic pressure from the West and the Islamic world on both Shabaab and the TFG, with the aim of securing unimpeded access to populations in need.

The model in this case is the robust international diplomatic response to Kenya's 2008 electoral crisis, when the country stood on the precipice of a civil war, and when leaders who would have pushed the country over the edge were put under such intense global and domestic pressure that they were forced to back down. Kenya still suffered from ethnic violence and displacement but was spared what looked to be all-out civil war.

Conditions are not as promising, but the same approach just might work in Somalia. As a short-term strategy it is certainly worth a try. Both Shabaab and the TFG must be put under the most intense diplomatic pressure the world can muster, led by eminent global figures and politicians from the Islamic world, Africa, the West, and beyond. This must go well beyond the current quiet engagement of Shabaab by Turkey and

other actors. It must include mobilization of Somali, Islamic, and Western civil society groups who can bring pressure to bear on their own governments to make this a top priority and, where appropriate, press the TFG and Shabaab as well. A key dimension of this strategy is that diplomatic and political pressure must be equally intense on both the TFG and Shabaab.

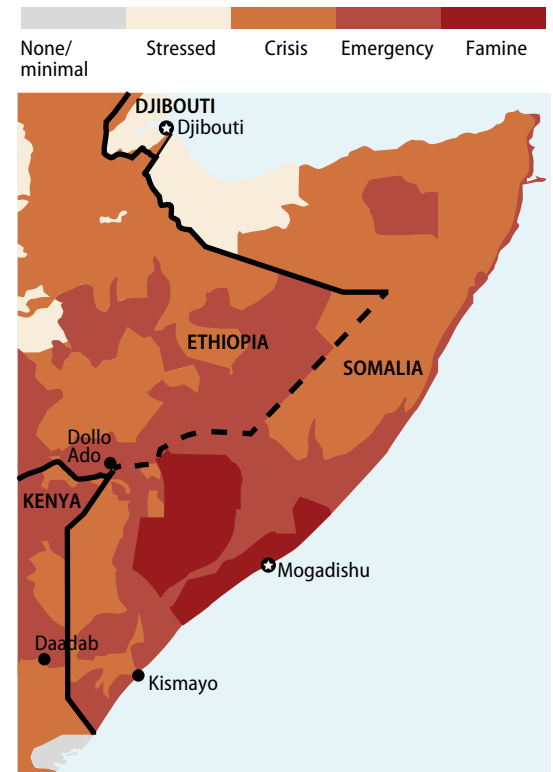
To Shabaab, the message must be clear: We all share a common desire not to see mass starvation in southern Somalia and so we must temporarily set aside our differences. Shabaab must allow large-scale food aid in for the next three to six months with the fewest conditions possible; this must include relief agencies with the logistical capacity to move large amounts of food and other assistance at short notice. For its part, the West must suspend counter-terrorism restrictions on aid into Shabaab-controlled areas. Monitors from trusted third parties – almost certainly from Islamic states or groups – can monitor aid delivery and reassure Shabaab that food aid delivery is not “spying” on them. The fewer the conditions by both sides, the better.

To the TFG, the message must be that the old game is over: The world will have a zero-tolerance approach to the TFG’s massive corruption and food aid diversion. The international community will be keeping score, and those who are found complicit in denying food aid to famine victims will be held accountable. Denying famine victims food aid is a crime against humanity and will be treated as such, whether the crime is committed by Shabaab or the TFG. Thanks to the broadened mandate of the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia, the world now has new tools to investigate and document this kind of malfeasance.

The United States has to take a lead role on this initiative, and the U.S. leadership has to come from President Obama himself. That is the only way to generate sufficient pressure to get U.S. government departments to move with haste. This path requires the Obama administration to take a gamble – to agree to allow third party Islamic partners to engage in open, high-level dialogue with Shabaab on a narrow humanitarian issue, and to prioritize humanitarian action over counter-terrorism policies for three short months. It will not be an easy political battle inside the Beltway and could open the administration up to criticism from counter-terrorism hawks. The hawks need to be convinced that this famine is already the likely death knell for Shabaab, with or without food aid, and that this is the right course of action both morally and strategically. There is a reason Shabaab does not want large scale food aid and mass vaccinations in its area of control – it fears the public mobilization that that entails and fears losing even more control.

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Sources: FEWS NET, FSNAU/FAO

The most powerful source of pressure has to come from the Islamic world – states and non-state actors alike. Muslim scholars and opinion shapers must be vocal and insistent that Shabaab has a non-negotiable moral obligation to open up the areas it controls to unimpeded famine relief. Shabaab must be made to justify its policy to Islamic leaders and scholars: How, precisely, does allowing hundreds of thousands of captive fellow Muslims to starve advance any Islamic or Somali cause? This is the Islamic world's "Save Darfur" moment – and an opportunity for newly-liberated societies across much of the Middle East to test their capacity to mobilize beyond state borders. Sustained engagement from the Islamic world will also embolden and empower Somali traditional authorities, business and religious leaders, and civil society groups, whose pressure on local political actors is essential.

It is by no means certain that Shabaab's top leaders will be pressured to change policies, no matter who is cajoling them. And the TFG will be slippery as well. Though the TFG and Shabaab leaders are supposedly mortal enemies, they share much in common, including the fact that both are in survival mode; both are deeply unpopular and illegitimate authorities that have created conditions of misery and then profiteer from it. The call to be accountable to the Somali people will not come naturally to either of them, which is why only sustained pressure has a chance of working.

This kind of "Kenya '08" diplomatic offensive is our last best option in Somalia. It requires no money or military deployment, only mobilization and political will. It is strictly a short-time policy gambit. It will need to be pursued in a sharply limited timeframe – a matter of weeks, not months – or it will be too late to save most of the famine victims. If it succeeds, hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved. That fact alone ought to make the decision quite easy. Importantly, even if the policy succeeds only in TFG controlled areas, that will be a major victory, providing better access to over 200,000 of the famine victims.

If a diplomatic surge fails to change the behavior of either the TFG or Shabaab, then we fall back to two very unappealing options. Plan B is acceptance of the status quo, in which we continue with our inadequate relief efforts, save as many lives as we can, deal with the huge long-term costs of a massive refugee crisis in Kenya, and place blame for the fatalities squarely on local Somali authorities. Plan C is some form of military intervention against Shabaab. This is most likely to take the form of an Ethiopian-led attack into parts of southern Somalia, but could also include a range of other possibilities, such as intervention by military forces from the Islamic world. If this occurs, aid agencies will need to be prepared to deal with a very challenging new operating environment.

The call for a diplomatic surge does not preclude eventually accepting the status quo or consideration of armed intervention. But before we opt for either of these two deeply troubling policies, we need to ensure that we have exhausted all diplomatic options in the coming weeks.

In 1994, the Clinton administration refused to engage as a genocide unfolded before our eyes, and 800,000 Rwandans died. Top administration officials – including President Clinton himself – have since confessed that that inaction is their greatest regret. Will the same be true for the Obama administration and other world leaders when they look back on the 2011 Somalia famine and ask: Was that the best we could do?

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Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

