Politicizing Famine Relief in the Horn of Africa Will Cost Lives

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The Horn of Africa is in the throes of the worst food security crisis in decades. Failed rains, prolonged conflict and rising food prices have pushed millions to the brink of imminent starvation. The numbers are stark: at least 3.7 million people are currently at risk and numbers of deaths could ultimately surpass the 1984 Ethiopian and 1991 Somali famines.

Much of the political debate on how to respond to the famine in southern Somalia has centred around the concern that humanitarian aid may be diverted by the insurgent group Al Shabab and thus go to supporting terrorists or prolonging the conflict. Al Shabab rose up in opposition to the Ethiopian occupation of 2006-09; it enforces an extremist agenda and has links to Al Qaeda. Since 2009 the group has banned most aid agencies from operating in areas under its control, viewing Western humanitarian donors and actors in particular as having a political agenda at odds with its own. For its part, the US has put in place legal restrictions on working with, or even talking to, designated terrorists, and many other Western governments have followed suit. The intransigence on both sides has contributed to the deterioration of food security in areas worst affected by conflict.

In early July Al Shabab indicated that it would allow 'Muslim and non-Muslim' humanitarian actors with no 'hidden agenda' to operate in areas under its control. Several days later it seemed to rescind its position, accusing mostly Western agencies of politicizing the problem and denying that the situation amounted to a famine. While donors and nongovernmental organisations are busily trying to raise money for the relief effort, they are hampered by debates about whether and how to try to work in areas under Al Shabab control. This debate may prevent the build up of financial and political support vital to a successful relief operation.

There are several reasons that people shouldn't keep their money in their pockets.

First, Al Shabab is a decentralized movement and it is apparent that there are different views within the movement about whether to accept assistance from international relief organisations. Some local administrators have been quietly allowing relief, particularly medical support, over the past two years even as the movement publicly refused to allow access, and this assistance has been getting through to needy people even if in some cases it has been taxed.

Secondly, in virtually every war zone, some humanitarian supplies are diverted. Certainly efforts should be made to minimize diversion, but the fear of diversion should not prevent people from giving generously to the famine effort in Somalia any more than it does in any other conflict area in the world. In a highly volatile security environment, some losses may be unavoidable but with appropriate checks in place the vast majority of the aid will get through to people who need it.

Thirdly, the concern is sometimes expressed that aid diverted may make its way into the hands of Al Qaeda. While Al Shabab is known to have links to Al Qaeda, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the former is a funder of the latter. Rather, as long-time Somalia analyst Roland Marchal recently argued, funds collected in the form of taxation, or seized humanitarian relief, are often used to fund Al Shabab's own relief operations.

Finally, the areas under Al Shabab control are only part of the overall relief picture. Needs are great in areas of Mogadishu that are under the control of the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government, in the overflowing refugee camps in Dadaab, Kenya and Dolo Odo, Ethiopia. Other more accessible areas of Puntland in Somalia, Ethiopia's Ogaden region and Djibouti are also in need. Relief in these areas is complicated by poor infrastructure and relatively weak governance systems, but should be easier than in Somalia.

The current situation in Somalia illuminates the extent to which western donors and aid agencies have come to be seen by many Somalis, not just Al Shabab, as complicit in the ill-fated statebuilding project in Somalia whether they have been involved or not. Other actors may have an easier time delivering assistance – Islamic charities such as Muslim Aid and Islamic Relief, for instance. The Somali diaspora, through local NGOs, mosques and student groups (see, for instance feedsomalia.org), are also heavily involved in raising funds for relief, and may provide a way of channelling private donations in ways that Al Shabab will not oppose. These groups have the benefit of having access to areas that Western organisations do not; however most are small and will not be able to deliver relief on the scale it is needed. It is thus vital that the 'heavy-hitters' – particularly the World Food Programme – also get access to areas in need.

Humanitarian assistance is supposed to be provided impartially, on the basis of need and without concern for the politics of who is right. Civilians should not be punished for the sake of making political points or achieving a military victory. There may be legitimate discussions to be had about the role of governance in ensuring food security and the root causes of the current crisis. But what is needed now is a singular focus in getting the access and supplies needed to prevent mass starvation. Politics can wait.

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