

The Politics of Famine in the Horn of Africa

Written by David Dorward

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DAVID DORWARD, AUG 15 2011

Droughts are caused by climate but famines are invariably political in origin – both local and international. Consequently, famine needs to be addressed within a political context.

For the past eighteen months aid agencies have been warning that the worst drought in decades in the Horn of Africa was threatening to degenerate into a major famine. The 2010-2011 winter “*azmera*” rains were the driest on record, leading to low yields of staple crops and poor pastures for livestock. The main summer rains of 2011 were thirty percent of 1995-2010 averages, leading to high livestock mortality and very low crop yields. Moreover, the current drought comes on several years of low rainfall across much of East Africa.

The present famine is potentially far worse than those of the 1980s because the population in the region has more than doubled. Over 12 million in the Horn of Africa are in dire need of assistance. Yet the initial response of donor nations was less than magnanimous. Confronted with economic problems at home there was little enthusiasm for overseas aid amongst nations of the European Union or the United States. The lack of political will on the international level and political instability within the region precipitated the current crisis.

The United States has belatedly increased its famine aid but many wealthy nations, such as China and Russia, have been conspicuously parsimonious to date.

In Ethiopia nearly 5 million people, particularly in the southern region along the Somali border, require humanitarian assistance because of the drought. This is in addition to some 7.8 million Ethiopians already being supported in part by the World Food Programme.

The Ethiopian government, the World Food Programme, USAID and others are actively involved in providing assistance, albeit there are claims that areas loyal to Oromo and Ogadeni-Somali dissidents have been under-resourced. The Ethiopian government points to security issues in these regions for the failure of aid and the influx in the first six months of 2011 of 54,000 refugees from Somalia into the already massive refugee camp at Dolo Odo. Now there are reports of measles outbreaks in Dolo Odo, deadly to drought weakened unimmunized children.

In Eritrea, the secretive government of President Isias Afwerki has an official policy of self-reliance. It refuses to admit any problems, claiming government stores are well supplied from a bumper harvest last year. The UN lists Eritrea as ‘in need’ but Red Cross officials in the capital, Asmara, admit they have no reliable information on conditions in the country.

Somalia has been without an effective national government since 1991. The country fragmented into multiple civil wars along clan lines led by local warlords. Civil society collapsed.

After an initial power struggle, the Issaq clan-dominated regions of former British Somaliland declared itself the independent Republic of Somaliland. Despite its failure to achieve international recognition, the Somaliland government has proven effective in establishing a civil society, with rule of law and measured democracy. Significantly, in the context of the present drought, it has so far been able to feed its people from government reserves, albeit drought has led to the death of many camels, the mainstay of the economy.

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Similarly, in the Mijertein Darod clan-dominated semi-autonomous region of Puntland in northern Somalia, the people have escaped the worst ravages of the drought. The influx of refugees from southern Somalia are beginning to tax the slim resources of the Puntland government, which will require international food aid but it has the infrastructure and level of security to enable aid agencies to operate effectively. Puntland's main problem is piracy operating from its coast.

The Puntland pirates are now able to strike in a wide arc over a thousand nautical miles at sea. It is a huge area to patrol and the naval resources of a score of countries have failed to stem the growing problem, born of poverty and insecurity. Meaningful alternatives through international development could have stemmed the problem years ago. Now it is an established industry. Revenue from piracy far outstrips the resources of the Puntland state, while entrepreneurs involved in the trade have no difficulty finding recruits or bribing officials.

The main famine area is southern Somalia, traditionally the grain basket of Somalia where numerous clans and sub-clan lineage groups have vied for control of the region and the old port capital of Somalia, Mogadishu. However, over the past decade, clan-based warlordism has been increasingly challenged by Islamic religious groups, funded by organisations and individuals in the Middle East, Pakistan and even as distant as Malaysia. The oil-rich Saudis, with one of the most oppressive forms of Shari'a law in the Muslim world, have been key players in the Somalia conflict. Such Islamic groups cut across the old clan ties, appealing to 'youth' – men in their 20s and 30s.

Most Somalis under the age of thirty have no concept of law and order, family stability, or personal security. They have grown up in the chaos of civil war. Not surprisingly, they are ready recruits for whichever group offers even minimal hope and a sense of belonging.

In 2006 a coalition of Muslim clerics, the Union of Islamic Courts, with clandestine military aid from Eritrea, drove out the warlords and imposed a rude form of Shari'a law on the capital. Their rough justice stemmed the chaos and was welcomed by the inhabitants. However the UIC was always a fragile alliance of disparate elements. America feared the Union of Islamic Courts was the thin end of an Islamic fundamentalist wedge, with possible links to *al-Qaeda*.

In December 2006, the Ethiopian army, with the tacit support of the United States, intervened to drive the UIC out of Mogadishu, in the name of preventing the establishment of a Muslim fundamentalist base in Somalia. Ethiopia had fought several wars with Somalia over the disputed Somali region of southern Ethiopia, was embroiled in hostile relations with neighbouring Eritrea and was in support of the weak "Transitional Government of National Unity" in exile, led by former Puntland warlord, Abdullahi Yussuf.

The United States carried out repeated air strikes in southern Somalia, ostensibly against *al-Qaeda* operatives but killed far greater numbers of ordinary Somali peasants in the process.

The Western-backed "Transitional Government of National Unity", the fourteenth attempt to restore a central government, was little more than a division of spoils, in the form of ministerial posts, between competing warlords. Formed in 2004 in neighbouring Kenya, after protracted negotiations, the Transitional Government returned to Somalia in 2005 but was only able to return to Mogadishu under the protection of the Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian intervention restored Pres. Abdullahi Yussuf to power but undermined his legitimacy in the eyes of many Somalis. His support for the American air strikes further eroded his authority.

The fundamentalist faction of the Union of Islamic Court regrouped as *al-Shabaab*, under the militant Ahmed Abdi Godane, and launched a guerrilla campaign against the Ethiopian invaders. They eventually forced the Ethiopians to withdraw from Somalia in 2008, but were unable to totally dislodge the weak Transitional Government of National Unity.

In January 2007, the United Nations authorized the African Union to deploy troops (AMISOM) in Mogadishu in support of the Transitional Government, bringing a measure of security and beginning the training of a Somali security force. AMISOM fought pitched battles with *al-Shabaab* militias for control of the streets of Mogadishu.

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Abdullahi Yussuf was forced to resign, ironically being replaced by a moderate cleric from the old Union of Islamic Courts, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, the current President of the Western-backed Transitional Government of National Unity.

The UN has repeatedly extended AMISOM's mandate but it has little impact outside the capital. The Transitional Government of National Unity remains dysfunctional, with little authority outside the capital, lacking credibility and a popular mandate. It is riven by corruption, with millions of dollars of Middle East aid, from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, unaccounted for. Members of the TGNU appear to view their tenure as precarious and seem determined to siphon off as much of the spoils of office as possible. Over ninety percent of the international aid given to the Transitional Government has simply disappeared.

American policy toward Somalia has been totally mired in the 'war on terrorism' and its preoccupations with piracy. The United States, the largest single donor to the World Food Programme, refused to allow American food aid into *al-Shabaab*-controlled areas. Nevertheless, the World Food Program has been operating in southern Somalia for most of the past twenty years, albeit often only after paying 'commissions' to local warlords.

Eighteen months ago the increasingly paranoid Islamic fundamentalist leader of *al-Shabaab*, Ahmed Abdi Godane, forced the World Food Program to withdraw from southern Somalia. The peasants, who initially welcomed the stability brought by *al-Shabaab*'s rough justice began voting with their feet as famine intensified, fleeing the *al-Shabaab*-controlled territory for refugee camps in Mogadishu and across the border in Kenya.

Children are the most vulnerable, with thousands dying. Families are often faced with the cruel choice of which children they can carry for days in the hope of reaching a refugee camp and which they shall be forced to abandon.

Dadaab in Kenya has been described as the largest refugee camp in the world, even before the current influx of Somalis. The camp covers some 50 square kilometres and was originally intended to house 90,000. With a current population of over 440,000 and some 1,300 new arrivals every day, it is an overcrowded makeshift city. The United States has pledged \$105 million in aid, mainly to refugees in Kenya.

Dadaab sits in the midst of a region of Kenya itself deeply affected by drought. Up to half the local livestock have perished and there is mounting resentment from the locals, who view those inside the refugee camp as 'privileged', with schools and medical services.

The corrupt Kenyan government is also accused of failing to take steps early enough. In some regions drought conditions have persisted for the past three years. Officials are accused of syphoning off food aid for their own enrichment while drought has become big business for some well-placed Kenyans.

Meanwhile, *al-Shabaab* may be fragmenting. The hardliners, led by Ahmed Abdi Godane, and the fundamentalist 'Youth', see the 'sacrifice' of the peasants as the price of an Islamic state. Ahmed Abdi Godane comes from Somaliland in the north and has no close lineage ties with the south. He studied in Pakistan under a scholarship from a wealthy Saudi, where he was influenced by the teachings of *al-Qaeda*. Godane's rivals within *al-Shabaab* have their roots in the local southern Somali clans and favour accepting Western food aid for their suffering kin.

It is time the United States and other governments took a more nuanced approach to politics in the Horn of Africa and followed the lead of international aid agencies on the ground in dealing with local leaders and communities, rather than seeking to impose a top-down central government. It will not offer an instant fix, but it's a start.

The longer-term solution to famine in East Africa lies in employment-generating development, not just projects that purport to generate profit and repay international creditors. Climate change has made rainfall patterns increasingly more erratic in East Africa and the Horn of Africa.

There are major problems caused by reforestation for farmland, over-cultivation and overgrazing by increasingly large herds supporting a burgeoning population, only to die when drought hits. The population in the affected region

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has more than doubled since the 1980s. Despite all the turmoil in Somalia, life expectancy has actually increased in the past twenty years and infant mortality has fallen. The general trend is the same across the region.

Traditional lifestyles can no longer support the growing population across East Africa. Only long-term development assistance that offer alternative means of livelihood and social security can rectify what will otherwise prove to be an on-going and more frequent series of crises.

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