

Famine in Somalia: Who is to blame?

Written by Kirthi Jayakumar and Joe Sutcliffe

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KIRTHI JAYAKUMAR AND JOE SUTCLIFFE, SEP 9 2011

Somalia has been touted as a failed state, or a state that has spiralled downwards on all fronts-political, economic and social. Beset by lawlessness, division, pirates, warlords and Islamists, all that remains of the state itself is a meagre cadaver. However, Somalia's most pressing problem at this moment in time is a rapidly escalating famine.

The African Union, the United States, the UN and the European Union continued to describe the situation as a drought until July, when it became evident that the death toll indicated that famine was the correct descriptor. Whilst one may believe that a state itself is not responsible for the hand nature deals it, the Somali problem does not seem to stem from a mere confluence of unfavourable geographical factors alone. Nature has been unkind with droughts being an exceedingly common feature of Somalia's history, but not every drought leads to a famine. Indeed, five decades have passed since the last drought-induced famine in Somalia, so questions relating to the origins of this crisis are vital.

In the light of the current situation, some particular questions arise:

1) Has Somalia's present famine emanated from its inherent vulnerability and domestic problems?

The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) controls very little territory, is rife with corruption and remains largely delegitimised in the eyes of the Somali population. Whilst the simple existence of an effective central government does not ensure the avoidance of famine, the autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland both have more pervasive governance structures than the rest of Somalia, and have avoided 'Famine/Catastrophe' status on the IPS scale through distribution of government reserves and enabling a secure environment for international agencies. However, to perceive Somalia's problems as purely domestic in origin would be disingenuous, as the current situation in Somalia – and indeed much of the country's recent history – is intractably linked to the role of international actors.

2) Has the careless use of military and political power by external actors, both local and international exacerbated the road to famine?

The actions of the US and their local proxy Ethiopia have certainly not aided in the establishment of effective governance structures in Somalia. The attitudes of US officials have been guided largely by the discourse on the 'War on Terror' which, when intertwined with secondary humanitarian interests, resulted in a poorly conceived top-down nation building approach which has proved disastrous. The US backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia installed the TFG in place of the Islamic Union of Courts (UIC), whose radical wing would later become al-Shabaab. The current promulgation of al-Shabaab, and the fact that the current President of the TFG, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was a moderate member of the disposed UIC reveals the extent to which US actions were ill-conceived and may well have exacerbated Somalia's insecurity.

3) Has the concerted effort of the United States and its allies to defeat al-Shabaab forced the influential group to ignore the fate of millions of people living in the areas under their control?

Al-Shabaab is a decentralised group, which encases both highly ideological Islamists strongly linked to Al-Qaeda, such as their leader Ahmed Abdi Godane, and local leaders from Southern Somalia. The latter in particular have

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been vociferous in arguing for the need to allow western aid agencies access to help the victims of famine, and many aid agencies have been successful in negotiating access and cooperation with local leaders. Unfortunately, much of al-Shabaab's leadership are focussed solely on the ongoing conflict with the TFG, and the insecurity this causes is certainly causing gross harm to the people they claim to represent. Testimony to this reality can be seen in the mass migration of Somali's away from al-Shabaab controlled areas.

4) While effective famine relief programs have saved lives elsewhere, why haven't they been able to prevent mass starvation in Somalia?

While the role of al-Shabaab in hindering relief efforts is commonly cited – and not unjustifiably – an equally if not more pressing problem can be identified in the logistical nightmare posed in attempting to buy and transport food and medicinal supplies during ongoing conflict and insecurity in much of southern Somalia. The politicisation of aid into al-Shabaab areas has also been unwelcome, with the US only recently allowing its aid distributions to be utilised in areas controlled by the group. Furthermore, local governance structures provide key organisational tools for relief efforts, but the top-down approach of the US in installing the TFG means that even in Mogadishu, these structures are not present and local need is great.

In the end, there are no easy answers to these complex issues... Please do share your thoughts via the comments facility below.

***Kirthi Jayakumar and Joe Sutcliffe** are members of the e-IR editorial team.*