

## **Famine in Somalia: A Man Made Disaster**

Written by Tom McKim

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TOM MCKIM, OCT 12 2011

Almost three months after famine was first declared in Somalia, UN monitors believe that as many as 750,000 people could still die in a country where wellbeing and dignity have for decades been sacrificed to power and politics. Yet as harrowing as this scenario is, perhaps worse was the disclosure last month by Unni Kanunakara, head of medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres, that in all probability aid will never reach those most in need at the epicentre of the disaster.

For many, Kanunakara's remarks were seen as a rare rebuke to fellow aid agencies, accused of misrepresenting the dire reality of the situation by understating the political challenges of delivering aid in a country without a credible government for 30 years. Rather than present the full facts, agencies elected to simplify their appeal to a public reluctant to donate to the cause lest their money fails to reach its target, or worse, fuels a conflict that famine aside has already claimed 400,000 lives.

However, calculated and cynical thought it may be, the choice made by these aid agencies should be seen as a product of a larger, more pernicious simplification that fails to properly contextualise the famine in the post September 11 world. Expanding on the questions posed by Kirithi Jayajkumar and Joe Sutcliffe in this blog a month ago, I will argue that the current plight of Somalia is primarily a consequence of the disastrous counterterrorism policy pursued by the US in Somalia for the last 10 years.

In the aftermath of September 11 and the advent of the War on Terror, Somalia returned to the agenda for US foreign policy at a level not seen since the ill-fated intervention of the 1990s. Lawless and awash with arms, Somalia was perceived to be an ideal haven for al Qaida militants. To combat this threat, the US launched a clandestine counterterrorism operation in the country. CIA operatives met, trained and funded warlords sympathetic to their cause, and the army began a protracted campaign of bombings, renditions and assassinations against those that were not.

In a scene all too familiar from Iraq and Afghanistan, allies became enemies and enemies became friends at an ever-increasing rate. Warlords used US money to rearm their militias, settle old scores and increase their influence. Opposition groups rallied around the catch cry of anti-US imperialism and seeds of Islamic extremism in a country hitherto bereft of an influential extremist element were sown. By 2005 it was clear that the policy had failed.

But the biggest US misjudgement was yet to come. Outrage in Somalia at the increasingly brutal and murderous rule of jostling warlords created the impetus for an opposition movement that would become known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). The roots of the ICU can be traced back to the collapse of the Barre Government in 1991, when a network of Sharia law courts became the primary judicial system in Somalia, subsequently expanding into the provision of education, healthcare and policing. Carried forward by a wave of popular support, the ICU had by 2006 gained control of most of Somalia, overrunning the warlords and imposing a degree of stability from Mogadishu not seen in two decades.

Though largely dominated by moderate Islamic groups, the ICU was viewed in Washington as a fundamentalist organisation inseparable from al Qaida. It would not be allowed to govern Somalia. In what was a textbook proxy war, Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia in December 2006. Coordinated, armed and funded by the US, they quickly

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defeated the ICU, taking control of Mogadishu within a week. In order to fill the vacuum they had created, Ethiopian troops then occupied large parts of Somalia alongside US Special Forces, leaving only in 2009.

As the ICU splintered in defeat, it was the previously fringe group al Shabab that rose to prominence. More fundamentalist in worldview and with links to al Qaida, al Shabab capitalised on the vehement opposition in Somalia to US and Ethiopian occupation. The symbolism of two predominantly Christian nations operating in concert to occupy a Muslim one further aided their cause. By 2010 al Shabab controlled most of central and southern Somalia, dwarfing the area held by the US backed Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu. After eight years of calamitous Bush Administration policy that provoked and multiplied the very extremism in Somalia it sought to combat, Obama has brazenly stepped up covert military operations, adding the use of drones to the assassinations and renditions already commonplace.

This is the context in which the famine in Somalia should be viewed. Western aid agencies are clambering to assert their neutrality in a country where no one can truly claim disinterest. Their efforts to negotiate the delivery of aid to those in al Shabab held territory further hampered by a US counterterrorism policy that unconditionally criminalises any group that engages with a listed terrorist organisation.

In the aftermath of the Ethiopian drought of 1984-85 cries of 'never again' echoed around the world. Preventative measures were implemented. Early warning systems were put in place and contingency plans created. Initially in Somalia these systems worked. The Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) identified drought in the Horn of Africa as long ago as May 2009. The problem however is this: Though the drought may be a natural disaster, the famine it has created is man made. The Somali people, for decades pawns in a catastrophic game of geopolitics, are paying the ultimate price for a counterterrorism policy that has exacerbated the very threat it sought to quell. Now, when western assistance is truly merited, the gates appear firmly shut.

*Tom McKim is a member of the Editorial Team*

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