

# Instruments of Pain (III): Conflict and Famine in Somalia

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*Internally displaced Somalis carry their belongings as they flee from drought stricken regions in Lower Shabelle before entering makeshift camps in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, on 17 March 2017. REUTERS/Feisal Omar*

Chronic conflict is preventing effective response to Somalia's prolonged drought and humanitarian crisis. This special briefing, the third in a series of four examining the famine threats there and in Yemen, South Sudan and Nigeria, urges Somalia to improve

governance and promote countrywide clan reconciliation to end the war.

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## I. Overview

History is at risk of tragically repeating itself. Once again, conflict-wracked Somalia is faced with mass hunger, just six years after a man-made famine took the lives of 250,000 people, mostly children, and 25 years after another killed 300,000, triggering a U.S.

and UN intervention without which many more would have perished. An estimated 6.2 million people – half the country’s population – are in dire need; over three million are in a “crisis” or “emergency” situation, faced with death due to hunger and disease. While governmental and international responses have been relatively swift and relief efforts better coordinated (in part, because of lessons learned from the 2011 famine), many former limitations and challenges remain. Today, Somalis are starving because funding is insufficient and because access denial and insecurity impede delivery; most of all, they are starving because chronic conflict has destroyed their savings and ability to cope with periodic drought. The government and its international partners must tackle these immediate impediments and do more to stabilise the country lest yet another famine loom in the not-too-distant future.

*“Somalis are starving [...] because chronic conflict has destroyed their savings and ability to cope with periodic drought.”*

As in 2011, the epicentre of the current humanitarian crisis is south-central Somalia where Al-Shabaab, a violent Islamist insurgency, and localised clan conflicts have compounded the drought’s impact, undermined subsistence farming and cereal production, and led to crippling inflation and skyrocketing food prices, as well as mass displacement. Pockets in northern Puntland and Somaliland have also been badly hit, though the situation is far less grim than in the south.

Greater international assistance is urgently needed but will not be enough. A central cause of the crisis is access restrictions, provoked all at once by Al-Shabaab-orchestrated violence and insecurity, increased numbers of checkpoints on major aid supply routes, bureaucratic impediments and hefty illicit fees that both limit reach and increase delivery costs. Muslim community leaders and clerics should seek to persuade Al-Shabaab to allow access to areas under its control. But access restrictions are also the work of clan militias and disgruntled government and federal state forces engaging in predatory behaviour and routinely erecting barriers on major highways to extort money. The federal government and federal member states need, therefore, to pressure them too: through negotiations with clan militias if feasible, by considering military options to dismantle the checkpoints and provide armed escorts to relief convoys if necessary. And the federal government and federal member states should ease official impediments and red tape, which further constrain access. With a massive number of vulnerable people on the move in remote areas, the federal government and federal member states will need to do more to assist them and, in particular, curb rampant sexual violence in displaced peoples' camps. These are all important steps, but to get beyond palliatives and find a more sustainable solution, the government will need to tackle the conflict itself, which remains the principal trigger and contributor to this unfolding humanitarian catastrophe: by improving governance; taking steps to address the division of power and resources among the central government and member states in a permanent

constitution; and promoting countrywide clan reconciliation.

## II. Conflict, Drought, Displacement, Access Denial and Hunger

### A. An Acute Humanitarian Crisis

Since the central state's collapse in 1991, Somalia has been wracked by acute humanitarian crises of varying intensity and experienced two major famines – in 1992-1993 and 2011-2012. A combination of protracted armed conflict and climatic as well as environmental stresses has made the country highly vulnerable to periodic large-scale famine.

The immediate cause of the current crisis is extensive and prolonged drought provoked by two consecutive years of failed *Deyr* (October-December) and *Gu* (April-June) rains. This triggered a humanitarian catastrophe on a scale unprecedented since 2011. Subsistence farming in the Shabelle and Juba river valleys has all but collapsed; prices of staple grains and legumes (maize, sorghum and beans) have doubled; and millions of livestock have perished. Deforestation (partly fuelled by the charcoal trade), soil erosion, coupled with diminishing volumes of water in the three major rivers – Shabelle, Janale and Juba – in turn have severely undermined subsistence farming in the fertile riverine belts. Somalis also blame insufficient local production of traditional coarse grains on land grabbing by businessmen connected to powerful clans and the switch to cash crops, such as lemons and sesame seed, especially in Lower Shabelle.

In many urban centres in south-central Somalia food is increasingly scarce and available only at prices internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the very poor simply cannot afford. In an effort not to further undermine the regional market (with free relief food that disincentives farmers from planting more crops), and because it is more efficient, a number of aid agencies, among them USAID, UKAid and ACF (Action Contre la Faim) are sending small sums of money directly to needy families via mobile phones.

The drought situation is not about to improve. Despite the onset of *Gu* rains in April in some parts of Somalia, experts predict the prolonged dry spell will persist.

Some 6.2 million people are in dire need of assistance and nearly 600,000 have been displaced since November 2016.

The bulk live in makeshift camps in Baidoa and Mogadishu and are increasingly desperate. Overcrowding and poor sanitation incubates infectious diseases like cholera and measles. In some of the camps, “gatekeepers” masquerading as “camp elders” are beginning to obstruct aid deliveries and extort bribes. Hundreds of thousands of victims of previous displacements also live precariously in cities and bigger towns.

What stands in the way of a more effective and sustainable response to this humanitarian emergency are not acts of God or of nature. It is the intractable conflict that Somalia has experienced since the early 1990s. True, aid agencies are now able to reach close to

two million vulnerable people. But they continue to face enormous challenges in meeting their target of reaching 5.5 million, because many areas are inaccessible and insecure.

## **B. Al-Shabaab Checkpoints and Access Denial**

Al-Shabaab maintains an active military presence in much of the south's drought-stricken countryside, and its violence and other destabilising activities constitute the greatest impediment to the delivery of relief to drought victims. The group routinely launches deadly assaults on troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Somalia Federal Government (SFG) and federal member states; runs "security checkpoints" on major routes; and uses a variety of coercive tactics to prevent people from leaving and block access to aid agencies.

Al-Shabaab's complex and fraught relationship with humanitarian agencies operating in south-central Somalia was not always hostile. Prior to the 2011 famine, a few of its top commanders, notably Mukhtar Robow, cultivated cordial ties with relief agencies, granted them limited access after payment of "fees" and used their influence to secure release of abducted aid workers.

But the 2011 famine coincided with two significant setbacks for Al-Shabaab: first, a major AMISOM offensive as a result of which the movement lost key urban strongholds in rapid succession; second, increased U.S. attacks using drones and special operations forces targeting its top leadership. An

increasingly paranoid Al-Shabaab severed links to relief agencies and banned foreign aid agencies and their local partners from its territory, accusing them of espionage.

In February and March 2017, large numbers of drought-stricken families began spontaneously leaving areas Al-Shabaab controlled in Bay and Bakool, as well as the Shabelle and Juba river valleys in search of relief assistance in federal and state government-controlled territory. This raised speculation that the militant group might be softening its uncompromising attitude toward foreign aid, perhaps because of the gravity of the situation and criticism it endured when it blocked Western food aid during the 2011 famine. These assumptions proved misplaced. Al-Shabaab blocked the exodus through coercion and by providing its own relief to hungry communities, arguably because of its heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability – a realisation that mass depopulation might expose it to aerial and ground attacks.

*“Al-Shabaab continues to hold drought victims hostage by blocking international organisations, the Somalia Federal Government and local NGOs from delivering aid.*

Today, Al-Shabaab continues to hold drought victims hostage by blocking international organisations, the Somalia Federal Government and local NGOs from delivering aid, even though territories under Al-Shabaab’s control in south-central Somalia are among



the most severely affected. Worse, those found with Western-donated food and items risk arrest.

In one such incident in the town of Waajid (Bay Region), in April, Al-Shabaab detained a group of people transporting relief food on donkey carts, burned the food and issued an edict warning against accepting handouts from “crusaders and apostates” (a reference to foreigners and the Somali government). The fate of those who were arrested remains unknown. But this incident, together with an April improvised explosive device (IED) attack on a UN World Food Programme (WFP) convoy in Mogadishu’s KM-3 district, suggests Al-Shabaab may be intent on using violence to disrupt aid operations.

Still, Al-Shabaab has sought to mollify critics and stem the exodus of people fleeing hunger and water shortage in areas it controls. To that end, it recently launched its own parallel relief effort to provide livestock, food, water and even money – collected from compulsory donations imposed on businesses and individuals across all Somali towns – to drought-stricken Somalis.

But while its effectiveness is hard to gauge, Al-Shabaab clearly could not single-handedly stave off such large-scale famine and any speculation that the group may be amenable, through negotiations, to open up areas under its control to aid agencies seems at the very least premature. If anything, major military setbacks since 2011 and the relentless U.S. drone campaign targeting its leadership have made the group

even more militant and suspicious of Western relief agencies.

Nor have expectations that Al-Shabaab might be more charitable toward Muslim relief agencies been borne out. Its hostility vis-à-vis international aid efforts no longer distinguishes between Western and Muslim NGOs; the group deems Turkish and United Arab Emirates (UAE) personnel and facilities legitimate targets.

As long as there is no dramatic deterioration in the coming months and it can keep a lid on the hunger crisis through its own parallel aid and coercion, and as long as no mass deaths occur under its watch, Al-Shabaab will likely continue to rebuff calls for dialogue to grant access to humanitarian agencies.

### **C. Clan Conflicts: Insecurity, Checkpoints and Access Denial**

Al-Shabaab is not the only non-state armed actor whose actions have a direct impact on the humanitarian crisis. Parts of the country remain trapped in unresolved inter-clan conflicts. These tensions are typically exacerbated in times of drought when massive numbers of people and livestock move across traditional clan “boundaries” in search of water and pasture. Pre-existing clan disputes tend to resurface, sometimes resulting in sporadic, low-level clashes among clan militias. This is particularly true in Sool and Sanaag regions (northern Somalia) as well as Hiiraan, Galgadud, Mudug Lower and Middle Shabelle in south-central Somalia. A series of clashes in the

contested town of Galkacyo in north-central Somalia in the last two years triggered a massive displacement, with estimates ranging between 75,000 and 100,000, and a humanitarian crisis.

Clan grievances and conflicts often occur in areas marked by contested sub-national boundaries and in territories better endowed with resources such as water and infrastructure (mostly roads, as well as airports and harbours). In the past, traditional elders brokered temporary local truces among warring clans. Some new federal member states have since reduced the elders' role in a bid to control local reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts (and to attract donor funding for such endeavours), but without replicating the credible or effective mechanisms required to manage conflicts over resources, especially water wells and reservoirs. In many instances, predatory/criminal clan militias as well as rogue security elements belonging to the federal states exploit these localised conflicts, erecting checkpoints on major routes to serve as "toll stations" as a means of extracting money.

### **III. Preying on IDPs and Vulnerable Communities**

Many Somali actors prey on IDPs and others who lack protection from powerful clans, in effect profiting from conditions of acute need and helping perpetuate them. These include in particular so-called leaders who claim to represent needy communities as well as criminals. There is also a genuine risk of exploitation by corrupt officials, although to date there has been no credible report of corrupt practices related to the current relief effort. At a minimum, the donor community should

intensify its focus on Somali anti-corruption institutions and civil society organisations. If leaders suspected of corruption cannot be held accountable in Somalia, consideration should be given to their being prosecuted by governments of countries in which they hold dual citizenship.

### **A. Exploitation of IDPs**

Most IDPs, both new and older, live in makeshift camps in major cities and towns. With few if any employment opportunities, they typically survive on remittances from relatives abroad and international assistance.

In some camps, so-called gatekeepers masquerading as camp elders manipulate aid deliveries and extort bribes. Likewise, many IDPs face abuse at the hands of government and private actors, who often have links to local authorities, business people and militias. Beatings and rape are reportedly common.

Awareness of such dynamics would help aid agencies mitigate the power that predatory officials and private gatekeepers exercise over vulnerable communities by investigating allegations of abuse and orienting assistance directly to individuals and their families, notably via cash transfers, rather than to communities.

### **B. Violence against Women**

Somalia ranks as one of the most inhospitable country for women, a situation compounded by hunger, conflict and mass displacement. In the wake of the drought,

and while precise data is lacking, reports suggest rape and other forms of sexual violence are widespread.

Girls and women in displacement camps and those who have fled hunger-stricken villages on foot in remote areas are particularly at risk. As a result, the government has deployed additional police and special gender protection personnel to the camps. But more is needed. In particular, parliament ought to pass more stringent laws criminalising rape and ending the traditional practice (derived from *xeer* customs) of settling rape cases through clan negotiations that typically entail providing compensation to the victim, often in the form of a marriage offer.

This is symptomatic of a far wider problem. While the short-term focus ought to be on measures aimed at curbing sexual violence in IDP camps and amending rape laws, any sustainable answer will require Somalia Federal Government efforts to promote and institutionalise greater protection for women. Newly elected legislators – of 283, 63 are women – have an historic opportunity to seek change in this area.

## IV. Responses

### A. International Response

Donors and humanitarian agencies, including the UN, were better prepared and quicker to respond to warnings of impending famine in early 2017. Since January, the UN estimates that the Somalia humanitarian appeal received “unprecedented levels of

funding”, with close to \$600 million raised in direct donations or pledges.

In early March, the UN launched an \$825 million appeal. Although precise figures remain unclear, the overall funding gap has substantially narrowed in recent weeks, thanks notably to significant pledges from the UK, Japan and Germany. Turkey and UAE likewise significantly upped their aid operations, typically conducted outside the UN aid system. The *#TurkishAirlinesHelpSomalia* and *#LoveArmyforSomalia* social media campaigns garnered the support of many international celebrities, helped draw attention to the food crisis and raised more than \$1 million. Turkish Airlines eventually fulfilled its promise and delivered 60 tons of humanitarian aid to Mogadishu. More recently, a campaign by the Emirates Red Crescent Society reportedly raised \$45 million for drought relief. Altogether a massive emergency relief operation is underway bringing together many foreign and local NGOs.

Improvements in coordination and management of humanitarian operations partly reflect lessons learned from the 2011 famine. The “Access Taskforce”, set up in 2015 by aid agencies operating in Somalia to negotiate better access with the patchwork of different authorities and minimise official red tape, helped create far more favourable aid delivery conditions.

That said, coverage varies regionally, with better results in most of the north east and north west, and more limited ones in the south-central region.

## B. Domestic Response

So far, President Mohammed Abdullahi “Farmajo” and his government have demonstrated strong leadership in addressing the drought emergency. The president convened a major meeting of all stakeholders in Mogadishu just days after his late February election; he put Prime Minister Hassan Kheyre in charge of government efforts; and the government set up a humanitarian affairs ministry and National Drought Committee to coordinate all relief efforts in Mogadishu and in the federal member states – developments welcomed by donors and relief agencies, even though they recognise that the government currently lacks both capacity and revenue to do much more than coordinate.

Other actors have lent a hand. In a symbolic gesture, the Somali Federal Parliament donated 50 per cent of presidential candidate registration fees totalling \$360,000 to the drought committee. Students have also been encouraged to donate a minimum of \$10 each. Private Somali citizens are pitching in. Companies and businesspeople likewise have contributed significantly to the relief campaign. The most significant local endeavour has been the *Caawi Walaal* campaign initiated by local and diaspora Somali activists; it has raised thousands of dollars and its volunteers provide water and food to some of the country’s remotest parts which are inaccessible to traditional relief agencies.

## V. What is Needed

With famine looming, donors should urgently provide additional funds. Because the hunger crisis is largely fuelled by high food prices – indeed, many families are starving even as markets brim with imported foodstuff – aid agencies ought to scale up the practice of transferring small sums of money to such families via mobile phones. But while necessary, such steps will serve as little more than a (critical) palliative if others are not taken in parallel to aim at the man-made causes of the crisis. These include:

- ) *Bringing down roadblocks:* The federal government and federal member states, supported by clan elders, should engage clan militias that routinely erect checkpoints on arterial highways critical for the supply of aid to drought victims. Where negotiations fail, legitimate authorities should explore the option of military steps to dismantle checkpoints and provide armed escorts to relief convoys.
- ) *Easing bureaucratic restrictions:* The federal government and federal member states should work with the Access Taskforce (an umbrella body established in November 2015 that brings together aid agencies in Somalia) to ease official restrictions and red tape impeding humanitarian operations.
- ) *Cracking down on crimes of sexual violence:* The federal government and federal member states should curb rampant sexual violence in camps for



displaced people by strengthening policing, including deploying more women police officers.

- ) *Tackling the roots of chronic conflict:* Ultimately, only by addressing Somalia's chronic conflicts can the recurring threat of food insecurity and famine be tackled in a sustainable fashion. As Crisis Group has argued more extensively elsewhere, this will require at a minimum that the federal and state governments, supported by donors, combat large-scale corruption and begin to deliver public services, particularly security, at all levels; finalise constitutional negotiations regarding the allocation of power and authority between the central government and federal member states; and restart the stalled national reconciliation process among Somali clans, focusing from the bottom up.

**Nairobi/Brussels, 9 May 2017**

**Appendix A: Map of Somalia**



*Map of Somalia. International Crisis Group/KO/November 2015. This map is partially based on the UN map No. 3690.*