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Humanitarian Crisis in the Horn of Africa: How the U.S. is Leading Global Assistance Efforts

On September 5, the United Nations declared famine in a sixth region of southern Somalia. Famine is “declared when 30% of children are acutely malnourished, 20% of the population is without food, and deaths are running at two per 10,000 adults or four per 10,000 children every day.” The crisis is most grave in Somalia; however, more than 12 million people throughout the Horn of Africa in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti are all in a state of humanitarian emergency. According to the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), “This famine represents the most serious food insecurity situation in the world today in terms of both scale and severity,” and conditions are expected to degrade further over the next six months. [*UN News Center*, [September 5, 2011](#); *The Economist*, [July 30, 2011](#); *The Guardian*, [July 20, 2011](#); [FSNAU Q&A](#).]

Conditions in the Horn of Africa deteriorate every day.

The famine and humanitarian situation in Somalia is catastrophic and worsening; by the end of August, more than 29,000 Somali children under the age of 5, four percent of children in Somalia, had died in the previous 90 days as a result of the drought and famine. That figure is certainly higher now. Additionally, according to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as of September 1, 3.7 million Somali people, which is nearly half of the country’s entire population, are facing severe food shortages and are in need of immediate, life-saving humanitarian assistance. The southern regions of Somalia, where nearly 3 million Somalis reside, are in the direst circumstances. Consequently, Somalis are fleeing the south in vast numbers, moving into Mogadishu and other areas as well as into Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Djibouti, adding great strain to areas that are already drought-stressed environments. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) established by the U.S. in the 1980s and funded through USAID, as of August 4, “Current humanitarian response is inadequate to meet emergency needs. As a result, famine is expected to spread across all regions of [southern Somalia] in the coming 4-6 weeks.” While hunger is a factor, disease is especially deadly during a famine and measles, cholera, and other infectious diseases are likely to pose the gravest threats. [*CBS News*, [August 4, 2011](#); USAID Fact Sheet #10, [September 1, 2011](#); *The Guardian*, [July 20, 2011](#); FEWS NET; [August 4, 2011](#); *UN News Center*, [September 5, 2011](#).]

Two consecutive seasons of low and failed rains in the eastern Horn of Africa have endangered food security for millions of people. Because of the drought, both the health of livestock and market prices have significantly declined, jeopardizing most of the population’s food supply and income. As Director of Policy for Mercy Corps Jeremy Konyndyk explained before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, “Livestock are a form of both income and savings for people in the region; as huge numbers

of livestock have died off they have wiped out the savings and income potential of innumerable families.” The cost of food staples like cereal has increased 200-300 percent due to the successive poor harvests. [USAID Fact Sheet #8, [August 18, 2011](#); Jeremy Konyndyk’s testimony, [August 3, 2011](#).]

In addition to the drought conditions, the situation is particularly dire in Somalia because of the country’s lack of a centralized government and the actions of al Shabaab that threaten relief workers and impede aid. In Somalia, “drought conditions have compounded other challenges, including conflict, a rapidly growing population, increased inflation, endemic poverty, and limited government capacity.” The Transitional Federal Government (TFG) lacks the capacity to provide services to people within Mogadishu and the al Qaeda-linked terrorist group al Shabaab’s control over much of southern Somalia prevents aid from reaching those in need. The country’s persistent state of conflict since the early 1990s makes Somalia the most dangerous country in the world to work. Since 2008, the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP), the largest global food aid provider, has had 14 of its relief workers killed in Somalia. There are frequent kidnappings, killings and attacks on aid convoys, making it extremely difficult to effectively reach the most vulnerable populations. Over the past two years, the humanitarian and security situation further deteriorated as al Shabaab expanded its range of control and expelled many humanitarians. In recent months, as the humanitarian situation worsened and the state of emergency spread through the region, the U.N. funded African Union mission in Somalia, AMISOM, has been able to expand control over a wider area of Mogadishu and provide some relief, while Kenyan and Ethiopian forces have made some inroads into al Shabaab areas along the border. Still, insecurity remains the primary barrier to aid in southern Somalia. [USAID Fact Sheet #8, [August 18, 2011](#); World Food Programme, [August 16, 2011](#); *The Wall Street Journal*, [July 21, 2011](#)]

Ethiopia and Kenya are better equipped to handle the drought because of established international assistance and their own government efforts to create resiliency and withstand drought; thus, it is less likely famine will spread to those countries. Ethiopia and Kenya have been cooperating with aid agencies for years and particularly since August 2010, when FEWS NET warned of a possible impending famine in the region. As Nancy Lindborg, Assistant Administrator for USAID, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, “USAID has worked extensively in both countries.... We have focused better on early warning systems, ongoing safety-net and community protection programs, and increased productivity in arid lands and pastoralists livelihoods.” USAID launched a widespread seed distribution and education program to teach farmers how to make arid land fertile and productive, which has helped many avoid the pitfalls of previous droughts. Similarly, Kenya has maintained its school-meal program in the drought stricken areas to ensure that children receive at least one meal a day, while Ethiopia maintains a Productive Safety Net Program with U.S. assistance. Eritrea, however, is likely significantly affected by the drought, but it is a black hole of information and allows little international aid. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remarks, [August 11, 2011](#); Nancy Lindborg’s testimony, [August 4, 2011](#); *The Economist*, [July 30, 2011](#).]

The United States contributes more food and humanitarian assistance to the Horn of Africa than any other country in the world.

In response to the famine declaration by the U.N., the U.S. government immediately augmented America’s presence in and assistance to Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. USAID quickly activated a regional Disaster Assistance Response Team (USAID/DART) in Nairobi, Kenya and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to monitor local conditions, “identify anticipated response needs, and coordinate response activities with

other donors. USAID also stood up a Response Management Team in Washington, D.C. to support the USAID/DART and coordinate [U.S. Government] humanitarian efforts.” Likewise, USAID is spearheading “multi-sector response programs that include vaccination, supplementary nutritional feeding, increased access to clean water, and sanitation and hygiene interventions.” [USAID Fact Sheet #8, [August 18, 2011.](#)]

Since the famine was initially declared in two Somali regions on July 20, the U.S. has dramatically increased its relief efforts in the region, pledging more than \$600 million to date in aid and working to increase public awareness. On July 20, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised an additional \$28 million in aid for Somalia and Somali refugees in Kenya. The U.S. government has distributed more than \$398 million in emergency food aid to Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti, as well as over \$9 million in new funding to support agriculture, livestock, and livelihood activities. On August 8, President Obama announced the U.S. would make available another \$105 million in emergency funding to help the relief effort. On August 11, Secretary Clinton again pledged another \$17 million for the region, designating \$12 million of those funds specifically for assisting the people of Somalia; and on August 31, USAID Administrator Dr. Rajiv Shaw pledged an additional \$23 million in humanitarian funding. Most recently, Secretary Clinton promised another \$42 million for the region while speaking at a U.N. High-Level Meeting on Somalia, of which \$30 million will specifically be designated for aiding the people of Somalia. To date, all together, U.S. humanitarian assistance to the region totals more than \$600 million this year. As Secretary Clinton explained, the money “helps pay for food distribution; for therapeutic feeding for those who are severely malnourished; for clean water, healthcare, sanitation, protection, and other services for those in need.” The hope is for the rest of the global community to quickly follow America’s lead to alleviate suffering in the Horn of Africa and put an end to food insecurity, particularly as global contributions continue to fall short of fulfilling the need. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, [July 20, 2011](#); USAID Fact Sheet #10, [September 1, 2011](#); Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remarks, [September 23, 2011](#); Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remarks, [August 11, 2011.](#)]

The U.S. government has been dealing with the complex issue of how to distribute the necessary aid to famine victims while doing its best to ensure that aid does not fall into the hands of terrorist groups. In 2009, the Treasury Department issued regulations barring U.S. government money from being spent on projects that would “materially benefit” a listed terrorist organization. Those rules coincided with Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designee al Shabaab’s growing influence in Somalia and demands on relief agencies. The Treasury rules were issued “after reports that al Shabaab was hijacking food, taxing aid convoys thousands of dollars, and threatening foreign staff.” As a result of Treasury’s regulations, and excluding the recent deluge of pledges, U.S. aid to Somalia “dropped from more than \$400 million in Fiscal 2009 to approximately \$80 million in Fiscal 2011.” To bolster the recent influx of aid and encourage experienced organizations to reengage in Somalia, the U.S. government issued new guidance to give aid workers greater flexibility when providing assistance in al Shabaab-controlled areas and OFAC has issued a license that covers State, USAID, and their NGO partners. Other organizations may apply for specific OFAC licenses. A senior administration official explained, “[W]e are seeking to reassure our humanitarian assistance partners, implementing partners, that they need not fear prosecution under OFAC [Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control] regulations as long as they are engaged in good-faith efforts to deliver food to people in need.” Although the security situation still remains dangerous since al Shabaab retains control over the areas with the most immediate humanitarian needs, members are continuing to work with State and Treasury to best address the situation. [[List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#); *The Christian Science Monitor*, [July 22, 2011](#); *CQ Today*, [August 3, 2011](#); State Department Special Briefing, [August 2, 2011.](#)]

In addition to emergency assistance, initiatives like President Obama's Feed the Future program are showing great success and promise for permanently ending food insecurity. In 2010, President Obama launched Feed the Future and the program in Ethiopia is thriving. As Secretary Clinton remarked:

The last time a drought of this magnitude struck Ethiopia, in 2002 and 2003, more than 13 million people faced starvation. Today, fewer than 5 million do. Now, that is still an unacceptably large number, but it is also an astonishing improvement in a relatively short period of time. And it is evidence that investments in food security can pay off powerfully.... In the next five years, the United States aims to help more than half a million people in Ethiopia permanently escape poverty and hunger, and more than 430,000 children benefit from improved nutrition. In Kenya, we aim to raise incomes and improve nutrition for 800,000 people.

Despite the program's infancy, the President's Feed the Future initiative is making an enormous difference eradicating food insecurity and bringing people out of poverty. For Fiscal Year 2012, the President requested \$912 million for Feed the Future, which is funded through the State Department's development assistance account. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks, [August 11, 2011](#); *CQ Today*, [August 3, 2011](#).]