

Chronicle of a famine foretold

Did the world react too late to signs of famine in Somalia?

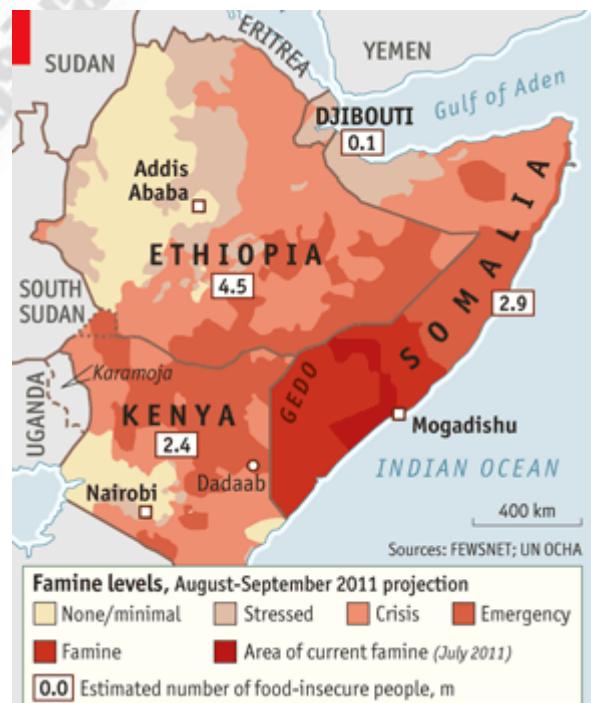


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On July 27th, after days of toing and froing, the first aid flight at last landed in Mogadishu, capital of famine-hit Somalia. It carried 10 tonnes of plumpy nut, enough to reverse malnutrition in 3,500 children. The mission seems late. After the 1985 Ethiopian famine America's aid agency set up a Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net) to give warning of disasters. It has been forecasting a threat of famine in Somalia since November.

Famine has a technical meaning these days. It 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. Parts of Somalia exceed these dreadful thresholds. In three provinces almost a third of people are acutely malnourished, says the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). FEWS Net conducted surveys across southern Somalia this month and found that malnutrition exceeded 38% in most areas—a catastrophic rate. Famine is likely to spread all over the south in the next few months (see map). About 2.8m people are thought to need immediate life-saving help.

Yet famine was not declared until July, eight months after the first FEWS Net forecast. The UN did not issue its first appeal until then, though it made a small provision for expected problems in November. The response by donors has been patchy. In a sign of its growing global role, Brazil has pledged more to Somalia than Germany and France have combined. Italy offered nothing. Of the \$2 billion the UN says the region needs, it has received less than half. The cash available for food in southern Somalia looks likely to run out well before the next rains.



Outsiders' caution is linked to the role of the Shabab, an Islamist militia which controls much of southern Somalia and is locked in battle with the internationally recognised but feeble government. The Shabab has banned food aid in most of southern Somalia since 2009, branding Western aid agencies anti-Muslim. The WFP, the biggest provider of food aid, has had 14 staff killed there since 2008. Agencies also worry that militias use food aid to rally their troops—some say this happened in Ethiopia and Eritrea in the 1980s—and do not want to pile into southern Somalia to find they have reinvigorated the Shabab.

Still, things may be changing. One militant group recently said it was willing to let aid convoys in. Another then announced there had been no change in the prohibition and claimed the declaration of famine was a Western ploy to gain influence. Now, convoys are going in and the WFP has begun to move into Gedo, near the Kenyan border, where malnutrition rates exceed 50%. Some, but not all, parts of the Shabab seem to be looking for help.

The Islamists are not the only local rulers ambivalent about the onset of famine. Ethiopia's government will never admit there is famine in the country: to do so would be to say it had failed since 1985. Both it and Kenya's government have responded to public pressure slowly. Most of those affected are ethnic Somalis, nomadic herders and Muslims: marginal groups in both countries, with little political clout.

Western donors and NGOs, too, could have done more. FEWS Net may have predicted famine but nothing happened until television cameras showed up, beaming out pictures of fragile children arriving at the huge Kenyan refugee camp at Dadaab in large numbers. Aid officers worry about being criticised by the public and their own bosses if they spend scarce resources before there is an outcry. The result is that donors often ignore their own early warnings. "We're not behaving like good risk managers," worries Duncan Green, the head of research at Oxfam.

Still, the response to the famine has not been a failure everywhere. In some areas, outsiders have learned lessons from the disaster of the mid-1980s. The drought in the Horn of Africa is probably worse now than it was then. FEWS Net says that it is the worst for 60 years, a once-in-a-lifetime event. The number of those affected—the UN puts the figure at 10.8m—is greater than in 1984-85, when about 8m were hit. In the worst-affected regions of Somalia, cereals prices are 260% higher than they were in 2010, comparable to what happened in Ethiopia, when grain prices in famine-stricken northern provinces in mid-1985 were about 300%-350% of their levels the year before.

The WFP says that 5,000-10,000 people could die of starvation in southern Somalia in August. If the famine lasts until the next rains, that means 100,000-200,000 could be at risk there: a dreadful toll. But 1m people died in the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85. The difference does not lie in the severity of the drought. It lies in what local governments and aid agencies have done to bolster people's resilience to it.

For the past few years the Ethiopian government, the WFP and others have been running hunger-relief programmes which give out not only food aid but seeds and help to turn wasteland into productive acres. The result, says Josette Sheeran, the WFP's boss, is that "we have one-third the number of people suffering from the emergency than we might have done [in Ethiopia]." Kenya has kept its school-meal programme running in the drought-stricken areas, so families know their children will get at least a meal a day. In 1984-85 famine ravaged the Karamoja region of eastern Uganda, which shares the same dryland climate as Somalia and Ethiopia. It might well fall into famine again this year. But Karamoja has had a lot of "food aid-plus" projects and so far is not on the WFP's list of places in emergency need. Ungoverned Somalia has few such projects. A lucky few tramp hundreds of miles to food-distribution centres. Most remain under the control of jihadists, at risk of starvation.

Quite apart from the death toll and the misery, this is criminally wasteful. When famine threatened Niger in 2005, the cost of help was put at \$7 a head. No one did much; the famine struck; the cost of help ended up at \$23 each. Economic incentives and early-warning systems say donors should act early. But the political incentives advise delay—until it is too late.

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