

CHAPTER 3

SOMALIA: DROUGHT + CONFLICT = FAMINE?

This chapter will look briefly at some of the particular characteristics of drought as a natural hazard. It will then turn to the complicated and sad story of how drought in Somalia, indeed the Horn of Africa generally, led to famine – a phenomenon the world has not seen for years, since the last famine in Somalia in the early 1990s.





Section 1

Droughts: Slow, Long, Wide

Droughts are the classic slow-onset disaster. They develop slowly, they tend to last a long time, and they cover a wide geographic area. Unlike earthquakes or cyclones, where the date (and even the exact time) of the hazard can be identified, droughts do not become disasters until time has passed. Because they develop slowly, it is difficult to determine exactly when the drought begins and ends.³³²

A drought is defined as “a period of abnormally dry weather sufficiently prolonged for the lack of water to cause serious hydrologic imbalance in the affected area.”³³³ But there is a lack of a standard quantitative definition of drought – how far from normal patterns does rainfall have to decline in order for a shortfall in precipitation to be a drought? Ten percent below normal over six months in time? 50 percent below normal over a year? In fact, given the prevalence of and destruction caused by drought, it is surprising that there isn’t more clarity or statistical analyses of droughts. While other hazards have their own databases (e.g. the Dartmouth Flood Observatory collects data on floods; earthquakes are studied and monitored by the US Geological Survey), there is no specific database on droughts.³³⁴

Droughts kill more people than any other type of disaster. Below et al. reviewed drought disasters from 1900-2004, finding that more than half of the 22 million deaths associated with natural hazards were due to drought. And yet droughts accounted for only 35 percent of the 5.4 billion people affected by natural disasters. In comparison, floods affected far more people, accounting for 50 percent of those affected by natural disasters. In other words, droughts kill proportionally more people, while floods affect a higher number of people than droughts – at least according to prevailing methodologies used to measure those impacted by drought.³³⁵ Surprisingly, they also found that only seven percent of the estimated \$1.2 trillion in economic losses from disasters occurring between 1900 and 2004 were due to

³³² As reported in our *Annual Review of Natural Disasters* in 2010, EM-DAT reports the occurrence of a drought in the first year it takes place; subsequent years do not acknowledge the drought even though its effects may actually be far worse later. See: Ferris and Petz, *op. cit.*

³³³ Scientists often distinguish between four different types of drought: meteorological (lower than normal precipitation), agricultural (where the amount of moisture in the soil no longer meets the needs of a particular crop), hydrological (when surface and subsurface water supplies are below normal) and socioeconomic (when physical water shortages begin to affect people). NOAA, “What is Meant by the Term Drought?” accessed 5 January 2012, <http://www.wrh.noaa.gov/fgz/science/drought.php?wfo=fgz>

³³⁴ Regina Below, Emily Grover-Kopec and Max Dilley, “Documenting Drought-Related Disasters: A Global Reassessment,” *The Journal of Environment and Development*, vol. 16, no. 3, Sept 2007, p. 332.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340.

droughts while floods, earthquakes and wind storms each accounted for approximately 30 percent. Why are there such low economic losses for drought? It may well be that indirect losses are simply not captured as well as direct physical damage incurred by other types of disasters. While droughts destroy crops and livelihoods, they rarely damage built structures or infrastructure. Moreover, the 2011 drought in the US southwest notwithstanding, droughts tend to affect poor nations more so than wealthy ones, where data collection is generally less comprehensive.³³⁶

In comparison with other disasters, droughts tend to affect spatially larger land areas. While droughts can and do occur in any region of the world, they are more likely to occur in arid areas, known as drylands. Given the fact that drylands cover about 41 percent of the global landmass, comprise 44 percent of the world's cultivated lands, and are home to a third of the world's population or two billion people, the potential for drought to have catastrophic consequences is significant.³³⁷

It is important to stress that aridity is a long term climatic phenomenon and a defining physical characteristic of drylands, while "drought is an episodic feature, which can affect any environment, but is also a frequent and defining characteristic of drylands."³³⁸ There are a few trends that make it likely that drought will become more frequent: land degradation, population growth, and climate change.

According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 10-20 percent of the world's drylands are degraded. Land degradation is defined by the OECD as "the reduction or loss of the biological or economic productivity and complexity of rain-fed cropland, irrigated cropland, or range, pasture, forest or woodlands resulting from natural processes, land uses or other human activities and habitation patterns such as land contamination, soil erosion and the destruction of the vegetation cover."³³⁹ It is estimated that between five and six million hectares globally are permanently lost to agriculture each year through human-induced soil degradation. Causes of land degradation include overgrazing, deforestation, agricultural mismanagement, fuel wood overconsumption, industry and urbanization. There is a high correlation between extreme poverty, land degradation and rural livelihoods.³⁴⁰ Poverty can force people to overgraze, reduce fallow periods, expand cultivation, and follow land man-

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340.

³³⁷ Pierre Marc Johnson, Karel Mayrand and Marc Paquin, "The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Global Sustainable Development Governance," in *Governing Global Desertification: Linking Environmental Degradation, Poverty and Participation*, ed. by Pierre Marc Johnson, Karel Mayrand and Marc Paquin, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006, p. 14.

³³⁸ Pierre Marc Johnson, Karel Mayrand and Marc Paquin, "The Scientific Basis: Links between Land Degradation, Drought and Desertification," in *Governing Global Desertification: Linking Environmental Degradation, Poverty and Participation*, ed. by Pierre Marc Johnson, Karel Mayrand and Marc Paquin, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006, p. 14.

³³⁹ Glossary of Environment Statistics, Studies in Methods, Series 4, No. 67, United Nations, New York, 1997, <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1494>

³⁴⁰ Johnson et al., *op. cit.*, p.2.

SECTION 1: DROUGHTS: SLOW, LONG, WIDE

agement and cultivation practices that deplete soils. But land degradation is not just the result of poverty. Rather, it is frequently linked to governmental policies, corporate exploitation of land, and cross-cutting social issues such as land tenure, lack of rural infrastructure and availability of water.³⁴¹

When you add to this the grim predictions that rainfall will become more unpredictable and that droughts will increase in the future as a result of climate change, prospects for the future are frightening indeed.³⁴² Regionally, the impacts of global warming on drought will differ; in some cases like northwestern Australia, droughts have become less frequent, less intense, or shorter. In other cases, such as the Mediterranean and West Africa, regions have experienced more intense and longer droughts, conditions which are expected to intensify. The IPCC predicts with medium confidence that droughts will intensify in southern Europe and the Mediterranean region, central Europe, central North America, Central America and Mexico, northeast Brazil and southern Africa.³⁴³ What seems clear is that rainfall patterns will become more variable. As Leighton says, “While drylands are routinely subject to moisture deficits, including droughts, and thus susceptible to desertification processes, the concern today is that the intensity, incidence, and severity of drought and desertification are accelerating.”³⁴⁴

Droughts are particularly deadly in Africa. According to the World Bank, between 1970 and 2010 Africa had over 800,000 deaths directly attributable to drought.³⁴⁵ In comparison with other types of disasters, the Bank found that droughts produce the largest declines in GDP and tend to exacerbate conflict. Moreover, it cites studies showing, for example, that children malnourished during the 1982–84 drought in Zimbabwe had a seven percent loss in (extrapolated) lifetime earnings, delayed school enrollment (3.7 months), and lowered grade completion (0.4 grades).³⁴⁶ In other words, it seems that the severity of drought tends to cause long-lasting costs to a society’s human capital. As noted in a report by Save the Children and Oxfam: “Between 1997 and 2007, Ethiopia lost on average \$1.1 billion to drought every year; this almost eclipses the \$1.3 billion per year that Ethiopia received in international assistance to tackle poverty and emergencies over the same period.”³⁴⁷

³⁴¹ Hermann et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 29-34.

³⁴² The Washington Post, “Climate change means more frequent droughts and floods, U.N. panel says in report,” 18 November 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/report-climate-change-means-more-frequent-droughts-floods-to-come/2011/11/15/gIQAfWqHXN_story.html

³⁴³ IPCC, *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation*, *op. cit.*

³⁴⁴ Michelle Leighton, “Migration and slow-onset disasters: desertification and drought,” in IOM, *Migration, Environment and Climate Change: Assessing the Evidence*, 2009, p. 326.

³⁴⁵ Sanghi et al., *op. cit.*, p. 29.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-60.

³⁴⁷ Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

CHAPTER 3: SOMALIA: DROUGHT + CONFLICT = FAMINE?

According to the Economic Commission for Africa, drought and desertification are core threats to sustainable development in the region.³⁴⁸ Two-thirds of Africa is classified as deserts or drylands and the region is especially susceptible to land degradation. In fact, it is estimated that two-thirds of African land is already degraded to some degree and that land degradation affects at least 485 million people or sixty-five percent of the entire African population.³⁴⁹ Desertification in Africa is both a major cause and consequence of poverty and resource depletion, which threatens economic growth, food security, and political stability.

As Chapter 1 of this *Review* reports, severe drought in parts of the United States had a serious impact on lives and livelihoods in 2011. But the situation in Somalia and East Africa generally underscores the lesson that while drought is the result of lower-than-normal rainfall – a natural phenomenon – disasters are indeed man-made.

³⁴⁸ Economic Commission for Africa, *Africa Review Report on Drought and Desertification in Africa*, 2007, http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd16/rim/eca_bg3.pdf

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*



A Somali woman hands her severely malnourished child to a medical officer of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). Photo: UN Photo/Stuart Price

Section 2

2011 Drought in East Africa, Famine in Somalia

The summer of 2011 produced one of the worst droughts in 60 years in the Horn of Africa, affecting Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Following several seasons of very low rainfall, there was a total failure of the October-December 2010 *Deyr* (or short) rains and the April-June 2011 *Gu* (or long) rains were meager, resulting in the worst annual crop production in 17 years, excess animal mortality, and very high food prices.³⁵⁰ According to the UK Meteorological Office, the low rainfall (at least in the short rains) may be attributed in part to conditions associated with La Niña.³⁵¹ While all of the countries of East Africa were affected by drought and associated declines in food production, it was in Somalia that the drought led to famine.

In late July 2011, the UN declared the situation in parts of southern Somalia to be a famine in which 3.7 million people – nearly half the country’s population – faced a humanitarian crisis, but most of the issues facing the country were not new. The fact that famine emerged in Somalia in mid-2011 serves as an example of the deadly effects of the combination of severe and prolonged drought, ballooning food and water prices, poor governance, ongoing conflict, and an international response that was inadequate, for many reasons, to meet the needs of millions of people.

Somalia has long been wracked by instability and the famine of 2011 has an eerie resemblance to the last famine in the early 1990s. Like the situation in 2011, the famine from 1991 to 1992 was the product of the intersection of drought and conflict. In 1991, Somali president Major General Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown, ushering in what was to become a decades-long civil war. Africa’s worst drought hit the country in 1992, driving up food prices and causing extreme malnutrition. People began to leave their communities in search of food. At the same time, gangs of armed men terrorized Mogadishu. By early 1992, it was estimated that between one-quarter and one-third of all Somali children under the age of five had died.³⁵² By mid-1991 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was devoting half of its entire worldwide emergency budget to relief operations in Somalia.³⁵³ By late 1992, 1.5 million people faced imminent starvation and almost five million were totally dependent on food aid. The international community responded by in-

³⁵⁰ Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), “Famine Continues: Observed Improvements Contingent on Continued Response,” 18 November 2011.

³⁵¹ Reported in: Oxfam, “Briefing on the Horn of Africa Drought: Climate Change and Future Impacts on Food Security,” August 2011, <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/briefing-hornofafrica-drought-climatechange-foodsecurity-020811.pdf>

³⁵² Jeffrey Clark, *Famine in Somalia and the International Response: Collective Failure*, U.S. Committee for Refugees Issue Paper, November 1992.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

creasing humanitarian aid and deploying several military missions to Somalia: Operation Provide Relief, UNOSOM I, UNOSOM II, and Operation Restore Hope. But in October 1993 the forces of one of Somalia's strongmen attacked the peacekeepers and they withdrew. An estimated 300,000 Somalis died in the drought/violence of 1992.³⁵⁴

The way the 1992 Somali crisis unfolded was a shock to the international system. Before that tragedy, there had been a sense that the post-Cold War world order would allow the international community to intervene and to respond to crises in ways that hadn't been possible during the Cold War.³⁵⁵ But in spite of four separate efforts, intervention did not work.³⁵⁶ For almost two decades, Somalia was wracked by civil conflict while humanitarian agencies continued to provide assistance, mostly from bases in Nairobi. Still, the international system seemed unable to respond to the deteriorating political situation in the country. In the period between 1995 and 2010, hundreds of thousands of Somalis left the country in search of security, most going to neighboring Kenya where they lived in Dadaab, the world's largest refugee camp. Others made their way to Ethiopia and other countries in the region. For Somalis remaining in the country, internal displacement was common and traditional coping skills and strategies were eroded by the many years of conflict. Over the years, the United Nations undertook a number of initiatives to try to address the causes of instability in Somalia, but as of late 2011, these had yet to restore security to the country.³⁵⁷

The 2011 Somali famine illustrates the deadly combination of drought, conflict and an uncertain international response. In many respects, Somalia is the classic example of a failed state, characterized by clan-based violence; a militant Islamist group, al-Shabaab, which has targeted foreigners; piracy on its southern coast; an outflow of refugees; and virtually non-existent political structures. The following sections examine the intersection of these factors, beginning with the humanitarian emergency that was declared in mid-July 2011.

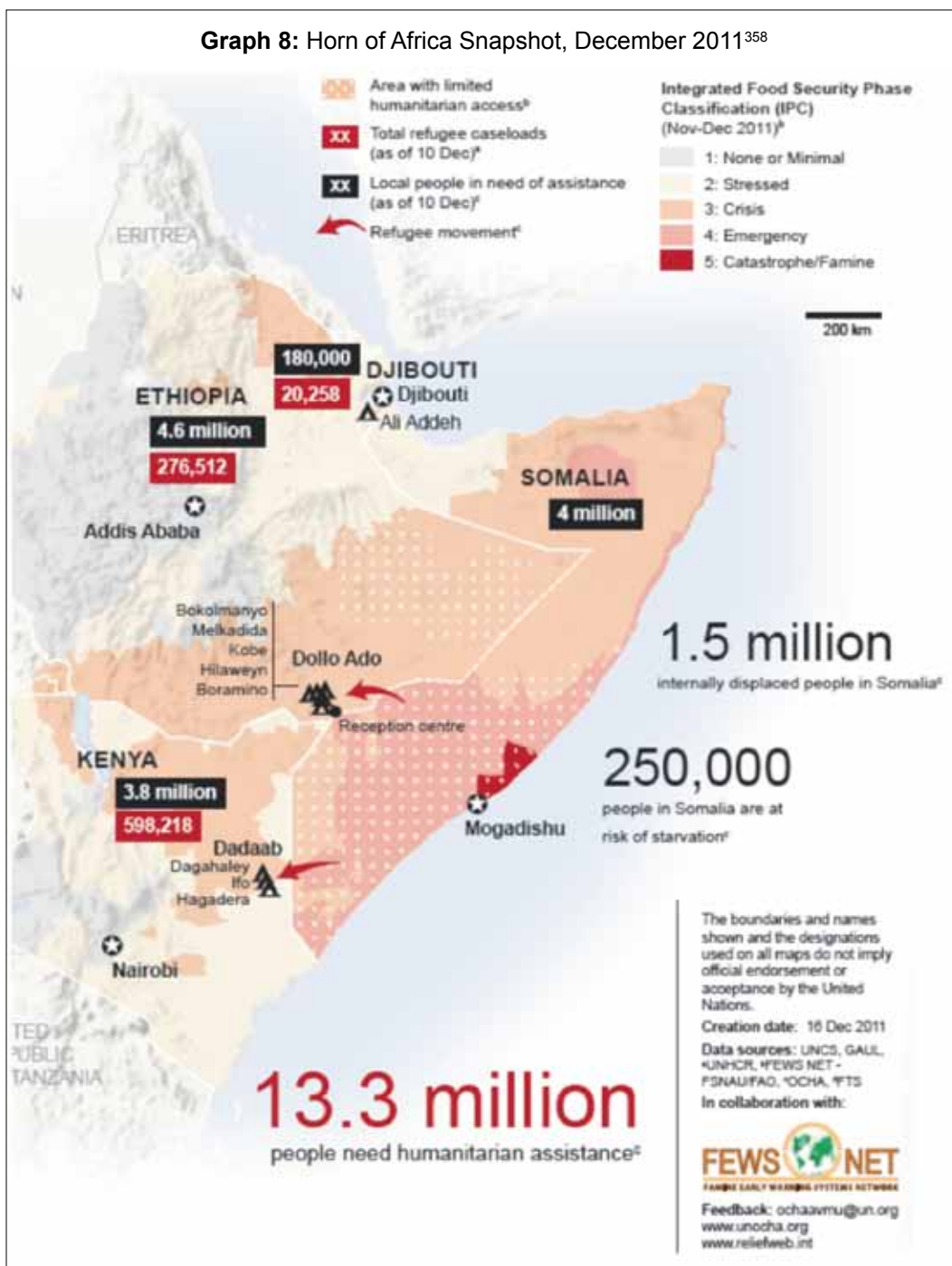
³⁵⁴ United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, "Somalia – UNOSOM I," updated 21 March 1997, <http://www.un.org/Depts/DPKO/Missions/unosomi.htm>

³⁵⁵ For further analysis, see Elizabeth Ferris, *The Politics of Protection: The Limits of Humanitarian Action*, Brookings Institution Press, 2011, p. 128.

³⁵⁶ For an excellent analysis of the reasons for the failure of these initiatives, see Taylor B. Seybolt, *Humanitarian Military Intervention*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

³⁵⁷ For a review of these initiatives, see UN Secretary-General, *Special Report on Somalia, S/2012/74*, 31 January 2012, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/74&Lang=E

SECTION 2: 2011 DROUGHT IN EAST AFRICA, FAMINE IN SOMALIA

Graph 8: Horn of Africa Snapshot, December 2011³⁵⁸

³⁵⁸ OCHA, "Horn of Africa: Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 16 Dec 2011)," 16 December 2011, <http://reliefweb.int/node/465667>

The famine

Famine was declared for two regions of southern Somalia – Southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle in July 2011. For the UN to declare a famine, three criteria are necessary: acute malnutrition rates among children exceeding 30 percent; extreme food shortages facing at least 20 percent of households with a limited ability to cope; and more than two people per 10,000 dying per day. In the famine-affected parts of southern Somalia, the death rate was three times this level. In fact, the UN reported that food security outcomes in Somalia were the worst in the world and the worst in Somalia since the 1991-92 famine with an estimated 3.7 million people facing a humanitarian crisis.

The drought hit at a time when the long-standing violence had weakened Somalis' traditional coping skills. Among other strategies, when times got tough in Somalia, people have traditionally migrated to other parts of the country where conditions were better. But many communities were already hosting large numbers of IDPs and there was little for poor Somalis to offer their relatives when they came in search of assistance. By the time famine was declared, some 1.5 million people – perhaps one-fifth of Somalia's population – were internally displaced. Many were crowded into the Afgoye corridor along a road running south of Mogadishu – an area which acquired the dubious distinction of hosting the largest concentration of IDPs in the world. Moreover, movement within the country was more difficult as a result of the violence. As a consequence, many left – or tried to leave – the country, as discussed in the sections below.

Conditions for those who remained in Somalia were grim. In mid-2011, the US government estimated that 29,000 children had died in the preceding three months.³⁵⁹ Not only were there food shortages, but livelihoods had been destroyed, disease and ill health was increasing, and access to education was abysmal. In August 2011, the Global Protection Cluster identified the following critical protection risks: forced displacement, family separation, sexual violence and abuse, early marriage of girls, and lack of access to basic services.³⁶⁰ The shortages disproportionately affected, as they always do, the weakest and most vulnerable people. There was an alarming rise in rape and sexual violence against displaced women who were rendered more vulnerable by the disintegration of traditional clan and other protection structures.³⁶¹

It wasn't just the drought that was causing the famine, but the severe problems in accessing communities in need due to the activities of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab is an offshoot of the Islamic Courts Union, a group of Sharia Courts who united to form a rival administration

³⁵⁹ CBS News, "U.S.: 29,000 Somali kids have died in last 90 days," 4 August 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/08/04/501364/main20088015.shtml>

³⁶⁰ Global Protection Cluster, "Responding to Urgent Risks in the Horn of Africa," *Alert*, August 2011, p.1.

³⁶¹ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Somalia Faces Alarming Rise in Rapes of Women and Girls," *New York Times*, 28 December 2011.

to the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia and controlled large parts of Southern Somalia until it was defeated by the Ethiopian intervention in 2006. Known for its virulently anti-Western ideology and suspected of having links to al-Qaeda, the group has targeted western aid workers and terrorized the population in areas it controls.

Al-Shabaab and famine response

By early August, the international community was trying to scale up operations in response to the famine and had begun airlifts of emergency food. But most of the starvation was occurring in the south, in areas largely inaccessible to international agencies. In fact, the two parts of Southern Somalia where famine was initially declared were controlled by al-Shabaab. The militants had forced out Western aid organizations in 2010 and even when famine was declared, few of these agencies were able to return quickly. The aid agencies were understandably reluctant to resume operations, in part because scores of aid workers had been killed by the insurgents. But there was another deterrent. In 2008, the US government declared al-Shabaab to be a terrorist group, making it a crime for US-supported organizations to provide material assistance to them. Although the restrictions were relaxed in response to the famine, NGOs were still uncertain about their situation – could they really guarantee that their aid wouldn't end up in the hands of al-Shabaab?

Since famine was declared in July 2011, many aid agencies geared up and aid eventually poured into the country. Al-Shabaab left Mogadishu in July, allowing relief to be delivered to that city. But the uncertainties and the danger posed by al-Shabaab continued. In September, the UN reported that famine had spread, with an estimated 750,000 people now at risk of starvation.³⁶² In late November, al-Shabaab ordered six more aid agencies to leave the country.³⁶³ By early January 2012, ICRC, one of the few aid agencies excluded from a ban by al-Shabaab, suspended its food and seed distributions to 1.1 million in the south after reporting that its efforts to distribute commodities were being blocked.³⁶⁴

Somalis on the move

In response to the escalating violence and increasing hunger, hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled to Kenya and Ethiopia in search of assistance. For a time, al-Shabab prevented people from fleeing the country and set up a cantonment camp where it imprisoned displaced people trying to escape al-Shabaab territory.³⁶⁵ Even the relatively stable state of

³⁶² OCHA, "Somalia Situation Report no. 13," September 2011.

³⁶³ Mohammed Ibrahim and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Somali Militants Shut Down More Aid Organizations," *New York Times*, 29 December 2011.

³⁶⁴ ICRC, "Somalia: ICRC temporarily suspends distributions of food and seed," 12 January 2012, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2012/somalia-news-2011-01-12.htm>

³⁶⁵ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Somalis Waste Away as Insurgents Block Escape From Famine," *The New York Times*, 1 August 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/02/world/africa/02somalia.html>

Puntland issued restrictions on the movement of people, as President Abdirahman Farole of Puntland banned internally displaced persons (IDPs) from southern Somalia from entering Puntland.³⁶⁶

As of November 2011, the figures on Somali refugees in the region were as follows:

Host country	Total new arrivals in 2011 (as of mid-November 2011)	Total number of Somali refugees
Kenya	163,599	520,230
Uganda	361	22,146
Ethiopia	98,210	181,271
Djibouti	4,867	18,748
Yemen	19,390	196,917
Eritrea	60	3,865
Total	286,487	944,692

For many years, Somalis had sought protection in neighboring Kenya. But in October (as discussed below), Kenya, concerned about its own security and its own ethnic Somali population in the north of the country, sent troops into Somalia and closed the border to Somali arrivals.³⁶⁸ As of 9 December, humanitarian operations at the Dadaab refugee complex – where nearly 464,000 refugees resided – remained limited to the provision of essential services, as the majority of staff had been evacuated due to insecurity in and around Dadaab.³⁶⁹

Broader regional military and security dynamics

While international efforts to intervene to bring an end to the violence in Somalia largely dissipated after the failed efforts of 1992 to 1993, there has been no shortage of attempts by regional actors to try to stop the deteriorating security situation. In 2006, Ethiopian forces invaded the country in an effort to dislodge the Islamic government established by the Islamic Courts Union, and to consolidate a Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Three years later, the Ethiopians pulled out; although the ICU had indeed been dislodged,

³⁶⁶ OCHA, “Horn of Africa Crisis Situation Report No. 30,” 16 January 2012, <http://reliefweb.int/node/470632>

³⁶⁷ IDMC, “Somalia: New displacement and worsening humanitarian and protection crisis for IDPs,” 9 December 2011, p. 2, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/76AE3E5570C42FE8C1257961004D7CD3/\\$file/somalia-overview-dec2011.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/76AE3E5570C42FE8C1257961004D7CD3/$file/somalia-overview-dec2011.pdf)

³⁶⁸ UN Secretary-General, *Special Report on Somalia*, *op. cit.*

³⁶⁹ USAID, “Horn of Africa - Drought Fact Sheet #11, Fiscal Year (FY) 2012,” 17 December 2011, <http://reliefweb.int/node/465715>

SECTION 2: 2011 DROUGHT IN EAST AFRICA, FAMINE IN SOMALIA

one of the byproducts of the Ethiopian intervention was the emergence of al-Shabaab as one of the groups splintering off from the dispersed ICU.

Meanwhile, the African Union deployed forces known as AMISOM to Somalia in 2007, and continues to have a presence there, though its ability to function effectively has been limited by lack of funding and personnel, with only 10,000 troops deployed and only to Mogadishu, at least until recently. The mandate of AMISOM is to protect the small TFG, to promote reconciliation and to support the delivery of humanitarian aid. However, most observers do not think that AMISOM has been effective or that it can be, due to the limited legitimacy of the TFG, its inadequate resources and its opponent. Al-Shabaab continues to control most of the country.

In 2011 and early 2012 both Kenya and Ethiopia sent military forces into Somalia in support of African Union efforts. While the Kenyan intervention has managed to create a buffer zone in Southern Somalia, the lack of a clear exit strategy and fears of terrorist attacks in Kenya lead to popular nervousness with the intervention.³⁷⁰ Meanwhile insecurity is on the rise in northeastern Kenya, with increasing incidents of terrorist attacks creating insecurity in the area around Dadaab. Food prices have increased, services are more difficult to deliver, and schools have been closed.

The international response

Against this backdrop of dire humanitarian need and a precarious security environment, the international humanitarian community sought to respond to the famine. But the response was slow.

As Save the Children and Oxfam report, the emergency in the Horn of Africa in 2011 was no sudden-onset crisis.³⁷¹ Thanks to sophisticated early warning systems (EWS), there were clear indications of the impending drought and its consequences, beginning with forecasts of the impending crisis in August 2010, as changing weather conditions linked to La Niña were confirmed. These predictions became more strident in early November 2010, when it was forecast that the October to December short rains would be poor. This prediction proved accurate, prompting the Food Security and Nutrition Working Group for East Africa (FSNWG) to set up a La Niña task force. In December 2010, the newly-constituted FSNWG for East Africa stated that “pre-emptive action is needed to protect livelihoods and avoid later costly lifesaving emergency interventions” and called on the humanitarian community (donors, UN, NGOs) “to be prepared NOW at country level.”³⁷² A multi-agency scenario planning meeting took place in February 2011. A Famine Early Warning Systems

³⁷⁰ AllAfrica, “Intervening in Somalia - Risky Business With No End in Sight,” 17 January 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201201170950.html>

³⁷¹ Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-11.

³⁷² FSNWG, “La Niña Alert,” November 2010, <http://reliefweb.int/node/374713>

CHAPTER 3: SOMALIA: DROUGHT + CONFLICT = FAMINE?

Network (FEWSNET) food security alert dated 15 March made it clear that the situation was already alarming and would deteriorate further if the March to May rains were as poor as expected. It stated that even average rains would lead to a critical food security situation until May or June and predicted “localized famine conditions [in southern Somalia], including significantly increased child mortality... if the worst case scenario assumptions are realized.”³⁷³ The FSNWG also warned that “failure of the March to May rains is likely to result in a major crisis.”³⁷⁴ At this stage, humanitarian actors were advised to begin large-scale contingency/response planning immediately, and to implement expanded multi-sectoral programming. Yet this call was not adequately heeded.

Why was the response so slow? For 20 years, the international community had intervened in many situations of drought to avert famine. The Save the Children and Oxfam report notes that mobilizing a rapid response depends on getting accurate data and media coverage – but this wasn’t possible in Somalia.³⁷⁵ They also claim that humanitarian workers on the ground were often aware that conditions were deteriorating and moving toward famine yet couldn’t persuade their headquarters of the urgency of the situation. Additionally, they note that some NGOs were wary that international interventions could undermine community-based initiatives.³⁷⁶ But there were other factors at play, including the perception that Somalia is a lost cause and the ever-present difficulty of access by humanitarian actors to communities in need inside the country.

The original 2011 Consolidated Appeal for Somalia was set at \$530 million in late 2010. This appeal was revised to more than \$1 billion by August 2011.³⁷⁷ On 13 December, the UN launched its 2012 Somalia Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP), asking for \$1.5 billion – a 50 percent increase from the 2011 CAP request – to address the emergency needs of four million people. While slow, the aid did eventually pour in; the UN received \$800 million by late November 2011.³⁷⁸

As in other disasters, funding patterns followed the typical distribution of best coverage for food assistance – with 94 percent of requested funds received. Other sectors such as protection were only funded at 17 percent of the amount requested and agriculture and livelihoods only received a little more than half of the requested funding.

On 19 November the UN revised its estimates of people at risk of starvation in Somalia from 750,000 to 250,000 with some three million people still in need of humanitarian assistance. Three of the six regions where famine was declared – Bay, Bakool and Lower Shabelle – were lifted out of famine by November. The fact that aid had gotten in and that

³⁷³ FEWSNET, “EAST AFRICA Food Security Alert,” 15 March 2011.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁷⁸ USA Today, “Many Somali famine victims afraid to return home,” 22 November 2011, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-11-22/somalia-famine/51353706/1>

SECTION 2: 2011 DROUGHT IN EAST AFRICA, FAMINE IN SOMALIA

at least some rains fell made the difference. Since September/October, there has been a massive scale-up of emergency response which has had a significant impact on malnutrition and mortality, with declines in crude death rates. However, FSNAU notes that “even with these improvements, current levels of malnutrition and crude mortality remain two to four times higher than typical levels in Somalia for this time of year. Under 5 death rates remain up to six times the typical background level for sub-Saharan Africa.”³⁷⁹ Global acute malnutrition remains near or above famine levels (greater than 30 percent), and diseases such as measles, cholera and malaria have led to many deaths. Casualty rates are uncertain, but the UN reports that tens of thousands have died in the famine – perhaps 50,000 to 100,000 in total.³⁸⁰

By the end of the year, an estimated 13 million people were still in need of assistance in the Horn of Africa.³⁸¹ The violence continued unabated in Somalia, and access by humanitarian agencies remained extremely limited. In late November, the operations of sixteen humanitarian organizations, including UN agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Health Organization, as well as international NGOs were suspended following the new ban announced by Al-Shabaab and, as mentioned above, in January 2012 the ICRC suspended its operations in the country.

Despite these setbacks, on 3 February 2012 the UN officially declared that the famine in Somalia had ended. Good *Deyr* rains between October and December, coupled with humanitarian aid, meant that the risk of starvation had declined. While the Director General of the Food and Agricultural Organization, José Graziano da Silva, reported the positive news, he also cautioned that there is still a crisis that exposes 2.34 million people – almost a third of the population – to high risks of malnutrition and insecurity.³⁸²

³⁷⁹ FSNAU, *op. cit.*

³⁸⁰ BBC News, “Somali famine ‘will kill tens of thousands’,” 15 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16568842>; see also: Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

³⁸¹ Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

³⁸² The Guardian, “Famine in Somalia is over, says UN,” 3 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/03/famine-somalia-over-says-un?newsfeed=true>; also see: FSNAU, “Famine ends, yet 31% of the population remain in crisis,” 3 February 2012, <http://www.fsnau.org/in-focus/famine-ends-yet-31-population-remain-crisis>

Other countries

Three countries – Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia – were almost equally affected by failure of the October-December 2010 and the March-May 2011 rains. All experienced crop failure, deaths of animals, and human displacement. But as discussed above, famine only occurred in Somalia – particularly in southern and central Somalia, where conflict further impeded traditional drought coping mechanisms and reduced access for humanitarian agencies.

In comparison, the reaction in both Ethiopia and Kenya was better – the result of superior early warning and early response mechanisms. But there were also problems with both countries' responses. In Ethiopia there was a concern that the government was underestimating the number of drought-affected people. In Kenya, the response was quite late, with an emergency declared only in May 2011. This was perhaps because the country's attention was focused elsewhere, on issues such as corruption and Kenya's new constitution. Although the response in these two countries was inadequate, the drought did not result in famine.³⁸³ The evaluation carried out by the UK's Disasters Emergencies Committee noted, however, that while mortality did not reach catastrophic levels in Ethiopia and Kenya – except among refugees – the result of the failure was far greater malnutrition, suffering and damaged livelihoods than would have been the case with more concerted preventive action and early relief.³⁸⁴ Perhaps paradoxically, when the rains did return, flooding occurring in Kenya displaced 80,000 people.³⁸⁵

Concluding thoughts

This chapter began by looking at the physical characteristics of drought and ended by discussing problems of humanitarian access and violence in one of the poorest countries in the world.

Although drought occurs elsewhere with devastating effects, it is particularly prevalent in Africa. Given the region's physical characteristics – with two-thirds of its landmass as drylands or desert – it is particularly susceptible to the negative effects of lower-than-normal rainfall. But drought, unlike floods or cyclones, generally has a long lead time. There are good warning systems in place and in the last few years, the warning systems in East Africa functioned as they were intended to. But in spite of the warnings and the long lead time, famine occurred in Somalia over a six month period, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people.

³⁸³ Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*

³⁸⁴ Cited by: Save the Children and Oxfam, *A Dangerous Delay*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁸⁵ OCHA, "Horn of Africa Crisis, Situation Report No. 29," 30 December 2011.

SECTION 2: 2011 DROUGHT IN EAST AFRICA, FAMINE IN SOMALIA

The 2011 famine in Somalia was not a natural phenomenon, but rather the product of human-made factors, including lack of governance, political instability and conflict, which undermined traditional coping strategies that have evolved over generations in response to the natural hazard of drought.³⁸⁶ As Amartya Sen pointed out decades ago, famines do not occur in democracies.³⁸⁷ The best way of preventing famines is not simply a technical issue of coming up with better warning systems or aid delivery mechanisms, but engaging in the far more difficult task of creating political systems capable of protecting and assisting their people when natural hazards occur.

³⁸⁶ See for example: Jane Corbett, "Famine and Household Coping Strategies," *World Development*, vol. 16, no. 9, 1988.

³⁸⁷ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1999.



Victims of famine seek treatment at Mogadishu Hospital.
Photo: UN Photo/Stuart Price