

United States halts food aid for Somali women and children

By Barry Mason
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The World Food Programme has closed 12 feeding centres for women and children in Somalia because it has insufficient money to continue. Aid workers have told the BBC that the cuts are the result of US restrictions on aid to areas that are under the control of groups designated as terrorists.

The WFP has less than half the funds it needs for next year. The cuts have been made at the height of one of the worst humanitarian crises in the region in more than a quarter of a century.

Large parts of Somalia fall into the US category of being under “terrorist” control because they are currently run by al Shabab, an Islamic organisation that Washington claims has links to Al Qaeda. According to the United Nations, half of the six million Somali population are in need of food aid. Most of these people live in areas controlled by al Shabaab.

Around 1.5 million people are internally displaced in Somalia as a result of fighting between the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and various insurgent groups. They are living in refugee camps where conditions are rapidly deteriorating. The UN children’s agency UNICEF says that of 250,000 children living in camps, 70,000 under five are likely to die.

Josette Sheeran, executive director of the WFP, one of the few aid agencies left working in Somalia, said, “Getting help to them inevitably involves dealing with al Shabab and other hardline groups now in control of the towns and villages across the region.”

The WFP was working with the Obama administration to try to overcome these difficulties, she told the BBC. Her diplomatic words mask a growing humanitarian crisis that can be traced back directly to US foreign policy. During the Cold War, the US poured weapons into the Horn of Africa because it

occupies a strategic point on world trade routes.

The breakdown of the Somali state can in large part be attributed to American actions in this region. The Bush administration attempted to foist the Transitional Federal Government on the Somali people by force of arms, using the Ethiopian army as a proxy force. Since he came to office, Obama has continued the policy of arming a government that has no internal support. The result is the mass exodus of the civilian population out of the capital into refugee camps.

The humanitarian crisis in Somalia has been exacerbated by drought, famine and high commodity prices. A coalition of Canadian humanitarian agencies has described the situation in the wider region as “a perfect storm of crop failures, a multi-year lack of rain, conflicts and political turmoil.”

Over 20 million people in the Horn of Africa are facing the threat of severe hunger.

The affected area includes the countries of Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, southern Ethiopia, north-eastern Uganda, northern parts of Tanzania and the northern and eastern regions of Kenya. In Ethiopia, one in six of the population is dependent on food aid.

Hundred of thousands of Somalis have fled to camps in Kenya to seek refuge. The international aid agency Oxfam estimates a further 100,000 will flee Somalia this year, heading for Kenya. The Dadaab refugee camp in north-eastern Kenya was built for 90,000 people but is currently holding 300,000. It is described by Oxfam as “barely fit for humans,” with many thousands without access or inadequate access to water and sanitation.

In Kenya around 10 million people already face food insecurity. Marcus Prior of the WFP explained, “This is the worst (drought) in nearly a decade. One in ten Kenyans is in need of food assistance.”

The severe drought is having a huge impact on the livelihoods of pastoralists who make up an important part of the economy in the region. Conflict between different groups of pastoralists has become common as they seek to graze their cattle and encroach on each others' territory.

Bright Rwamirama, a Ugandan government minister, told a news conference recently "We are losing animals due to starvation...in the cattle corridors." A million Ugandans are receiving food aid distributed by the WFP.

The government of Tanzania has had to dispatch 40,000 tonnes of cereal to the north of the country affected by the drought.

While the Horn of Africa area has been subject to periodic drought for many years, leading to regular food shortages, several factors have combined to exacerbate its current food crisis. High food prices are a major factor. Oxfam reports that in Ethiopia the food staple white maize costs 72 percent more than its five-year average. In some parts of Kenya, maize and beans are nearly twice their usual price with the same for millet in Uganda. According to the *New Agriculturalist* Web site, "In 27 sub-Saharan African countries 80 to 90 percent of all cereal prices were over 25 percent higher than two years ago."

Climate change is seriously impacting the area. Beatrice Teya of US aid charity World Vision stated. "The drought is becoming quite common, almost continuous; especially in the Horn of Africa...it is not giving communities time to recover."

The regular rains that used to fall are more and more likely to fail or deliver less water than in previous years. This continuous pattern of inadequate rainfall undermines the ability of the people to cope. A recent Oxfam statement says Somalia is seeing its fifth year of poor rainfall, Ethiopia its fourth and Kenya its third. It notes that in Kenya, where the rains would fail once a decade, they now do so every second or third year.

George Malakwen of the Eastern Africa Environmental Network has warned that the impact of climate change on this area will lead to "people getting out of eastern Africa.... I don't know where they are going to go...this thing is so expansive...eastern Africa is not going to be hospitable to human beings."

Africa has also been hit by the economic crisis. "Oxfam analysis shows that government budgets in

Sub-Saharan Africa will be \$70bn (£43bn) worse off this year as a result of the crisis," Phil Bloomer of Oxfam recently wrote in the London *Independent*.

"The G20 has delivered less than half of the £30bn it promised poor countries at the London summit President Obama made a commitment in July that G20 finance ministers would come up with a funding package to help poor countries cope with climate change. Yet when the ministers met in London earlier this month, the subject merited only a single line in the communiqué."

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