

Famine threatens millions in the Horn of Africa as Washington prepares expanded war in Somalia

By Thomas Gaist
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Even as starvation and malnutrition threaten more than 10 million lives in the Horn of Africa countries of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, the United States and its allies are preparing a massive expansion of military operations throughout the region.

“With nearly half its population (five million people) facing severe food and water shortages, Somalia is now on the verge of a famine. Malnutrition rates across Somalia have already reached critical levels and are expected to worsen in the coming weeks. Thousands of families are on the move in search of food and water, and many are now crossing the border into Ethiopia,” Save the Children noted.

The Save the Children report states further that at least 70 percent of those children screened in the Dollo Ado refugee camp in Ethiopia show signs of malnutrition. Drought conditions in that country are forcing children to drop out of school, putting them at risk of early marriage and forced migration.

According to Save the Children, the upsurge in hunger is the outcome of below-average rainfall during successive wet seasons, causing food and water prices to skyrocket, herds to die and crops to fail. Cereal prices are at record highs in Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania, while maize yields are down across southern Africa as a result of new pests including the fall armyworm.

According to the World Food Program (WFP), the devastating drought in the Horn of Africa is producing a humanitarian crisis in Somalia and driving urgent needs in Kenya and Ethiopia. “The number of people in crisis and emergency food insecurity levels [Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) 3 or above] now stands at 11.2 million people, with 2.9 million in Somalia, 5.6 million in Ethiopia, and 2.7 million in Kenya,” the WFP reported.

The WFP found that the drought is developing alongside an escalating humanitarian and political crisis in South Sudan, where more than 5 million people are in need of urgent assistance and more than 1.2 million South Sudanese have already fled to neighboring countries.

“In six months, we’ll be facing a catastrophe and a famine on a scale we cannot imagine,” United Nations humanitarian chief for Somalia Peter de Clercq said Thursday. UN Food and Agriculture director Maria Semedo warned African governments that without massive influx of food aid, the situation will become “a disaster like the famine in 2011.”

The Horn of Africa is already plagued by mass hunger. Ten million Ethiopians went hungry last year as a result of drought, and 6 million are currently in dire need of food assistance. More than half of Somalis lack access to adequate nutrition, according to the latest UN figures.

Nearly 40 percent of Kenyan children experience stunted growth as a result of inadequate nutrition, according to the WFP.

Amid the developing humanitarian disaster in the region, President Barack Obama approved the sale of \$400 million in weapons to the Kenyan military on the day before he left office in January. Nairobi announced shortly after that on January 29 that it would soon dispatch troops to support the US-backed regime in South Sudan.

The civil war in South Sudan has reached “catastrophic proportions for civilians,” with “record numbers” fleeing their homes under threat of “mass atrocities,” according to a secret UN report leaked to AFP.

Six years after its establishment as the world’s “newest country,” the US-backed South Sudanese regime is barely able to pay its soldiers enough to eat. Inflation stands at over 800 percent and “cash is so devalued it barely buys food for a week,” local sources told Reuters.

Although presented as a “natural disaster,” famine in Africa is ultimately the product of more than a century of oppression of the continent by world imperialism amplified by the ongoing crisis and breakdown of world capitalism. The poverty of the African masses, the absence of basic social infrastructure, and the reliance of much of the population on subsistence farming have persisted even as Western companies and governments have extracted vast sums of wealth from the continent.

Africa has repeatedly suffered major famines during the post-World War II period, including: Somalia (1991-1992, 2010-2012), Sudan (1998), Ethiopia (1958, 1983-85), Uganda (1980-83), the Sahel desert region (1968-1972) and Nigeria (1967-70).

Even as bourgeois economists celebrate numerically high economic growth rates in a handful of African countries, conditions for the vast majority of Africans have only deteriorated further during the 25 years since the dissolution of the USSR. The wealth creation that has occurred has gone exclusively to benefit a small layer of African elites and their American and European

backers. Africa's governments have abandoned anything resembling nationalist or "left" policies aimed at defending the interests of their populations from the predations of foreign capital. They have moved steadily to deepen their integration into the US-dominated capitalist world order.

The incompetency of Africa's elites to meet the social needs of the African masses is matched only by their enthusiasm for waging wars, invariably sponsored by the US and NATO powers. The past quarter century has seen a huge explosion of military violence and inter-state conflict on the continent. Between 1990 and 2011, the African continent saw over 400 armed conflicts, according to research presented by Dr. Paul Williams of the Elliott School of International Affairs during a January conference held by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). Williams also reported that between 2011 and 2017, the total number of wars in Africa grew by 60 percent.

The United States has repeatedly seized on famines to escalate its military operations on the continent. The 1992-1993 American-led military intervention in Somalia, "Operation Restore Hope," was launched in the name of insuring food security to the population. During the 2006 and 2011 famines in Somalia, Washington backed invasions led by Ethiopian military forces, who blockaded much of the country, while tens of thousands starved, in the name of combating the Islamist militia al Shabaab.

American-backed military forces have been operating on Somali soil continuously since the 2006 invasion. In 2007, African Union (AU) forces deployed to Mogadishu in support of the US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Ethiopian forces were withdrawn in 2009, but returned as part of US-backed Kenyan-led intervention beginning in October 2011.

In 2014, US media confirmed that American forces have been secretly active in Somalia from the very beginning of the Ethiopian-led invasion, further implicating American imperialism in a war that has produced thousands of officially registered deaths and displaced more than 1 million Somalis.

The past year has seen numerous signs that a US military escalation in Somalia is being prepared. American soldiers are increasingly involved in open combat and Washington is spurring Kenya to assume a larger military role. In October 2016, unnamed "senior military officials" informed the *New York Times* that 200-300 US Special Forces soldiers have been operating jointly with Kenyan and Ugandan troops, carrying out "more than a half-dozen raids per month," inside Somalia.

In November, the Obama administration expanded the Pentagon's authority to wage war in Somalia. The new "Somalia campaign" is based on "a blueprint for warfare which President Obama has embraced and will pass along to his successor," official sources told the *Times* in October.

US Special Forces, in coordination with troops from the Somali National Army, as well as the Kenyan, Ugandan and Ethiopian militaries, are organizing warfare from the capital Mogadishu. US intelligence officers are involved in interrogating prisoners, and air strikes organized by American forces are claimed to have killed hundreds of Al Shabaab fighters in recent months.

US forces were directly involved in combat in southern Somalia

alongside Somali National Army (SNA) units in January, including raids against the southern port city of Kismayo. American commandos are also involved in operations in Kenya's Boni forest, which lies on Somalia's southwestern border. Kenya's military has steadily escalated its operations in the area since 2015, and is constructing a 435-mile-long wall along its eastern border.

As millions face starvation, the US and its regional allies are engaged in cutthroat political struggles and intrigues. Rivalries within Africa's national elites, amplified and manipulated by the US and European powers, are setting the stage for an array of potential new conflicts to be overseen by President Donald Trump.

Forces within the US-backed Egyptian and South Sudanese regimes are conspiring to destabilize Ethiopia, according to African media. In January, a "dirty deal" was allegedly struck between Egyptian military dictator General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and South Sudan President Salva Kiir to back opposition groups, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

Similar meetings were held between al-Sisi and his Eritrean counterpart, Isaias Afwerki, in Cairo, as "a deliberate move" and "to pressure Addis Ababa," according to Egyptian sources cited by the *New Arab*. Cairo is anxious over Ethiopia's Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) project, which would give Ethiopia the ability to choke off the supply of Nile river water north through Sudan and Egypt.

In a phone call last month with Sisi, Trump pledged US military support to the dictatorship in its so-called war on terror in Egypt and across the continent. "President Trump underscored the United States remains strongly committed to the bilateral relationship, which has helped both countries overcome challenges in the region for decades," White House spokesman Sean Spicer stated at a press briefing.

The only response of the imperialist powers to the vast human catastrophe brewing in the Horn of Africa is escalated war and the further destabilization of African nation states, aimed at re-imposing colonial-style rule. The most basic demands for peace and bread can only be achieved through a movement of the entire African working class united across all national and ethnic lines, fighting for socialism against imperialism and its national bourgeois collaborators.

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