

Fighting and drought worsen Somalia's humanitarian crisis

Recent fighting in Mogadishu has internally displaced some 1.5 million Somalis. Another 1.4 million people are in need of food aid due to an ongoing drought. Wairagala Wakabi reports.

Prolonged drought, intensified fighting, and rising attacks on aid workers have handed Somalia its worst humanitarian crisis in two decades. UN officials say fighting between government forces and Islamist insurgents threatens to further worsen the situation, since it has made it hard to reach some of the people most desperately in need of assistance.

In recent months there has been an upsurge in attacks on the premises of UN and international humanitarian agencies, as well as abductions of aid workers. In late August, the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit for Somalia run by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said that the humanitarian crisis in the country was widespread and severe, with half of the population, close to 4 million people, in need of humanitarian assistance.

Cindy Holleman, an adviser to the unit, said this signalled a serious deterioration in the emergency food security and nutrition situation from earlier this year. "More worrying is that the escalating fighting and conflict is occurring in the same areas where we are now recording the greatest problems of food access and malnutrition", said Holleman. "This will not only place additional burdens on the people already in crisis, but will also make it difficult for humanitarian relief to reach the vulnerable populations most in need of humanitarian and life-saving interventions."

During July, UN-supported activities in Somalia faced serious setbacks. On July 20, the operations of three UN agencies were banned by Al Shabaab, the Islamist group that controls parts of the country. The same day, the militia group stormed into the Baidoa and Wajid UN compounds and confiscated radio equipment, vehicles, an ambulance, and office equipment.

The incident caused the UN to relocate its international staff from the areas, one of which was a hub for humanitarian operations.

Graham Farmer, acting UN humanitarian coordinator in Somalia, said an attack in mid-August on a World Food Programme (WFP)

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compound in central Somalia was the fourth "deliberately targeted" incident in 2 months, coming less than a month after militants raided the UN compounds in Baidoa and Wajid. "This direct, deliberate, and sustained attack on aid organisations and aid workers is intolerable", Farmer said. He added that there was a continued and growing threat to humanitarian operations and told *The Lancet* that a total of nine humanitarian aid workers had been killed in the country since January.

Last July, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) suspended activities in the

Yaqshid area of northern Mogadishu where it ran a 50-bed inpatient hospital and outpatient clinics because of heavy fighting. In August, it suspended its activities in Mareere, leaving more than 300 malnourished children without crucial medical care.

Earlier in June, MSF had closed its programme in Bakool region where it ran a 293-bed health centre that served a population of 250 000 people. In June, an MSF employee died in an explosion in the Hiraan region, which killed 30 other people. Two staff members of the agency had been abducted in April and held for 10 days before being released. In August, four aid workers from the French charity Action Against Hunger and two Kenyan pilots were freed in Somalia after being held hostage for 9 months.

"Constant shelling, explosions, and open combat among armed groups pose an enormous challenge to MSF's efforts to provide free, quality health care to people living in the capital, Mogadishu", MSF said in a press statement. "In July, for the first time in 17 years, MSF had to suspend

The printed journal includes an image merely for illustration

Mohammed Sheekh Noor/AP

A Somali man wounded by fierce fighting in Mogadishu is wheeled into the capital's Madina hospital



Somali children line up to receive a food ration at a distribution point in Mogadishu

activities in its paediatric hospital and three other health clinics in northern Mogadishu as staff were forced to flee for their own safety."

"The town of Jilib suffers from chronic food shortages, and malnutrition is a major health risk for people living in the area", said Karin Fischer Liddle, MSF head of mission in Somalia, after gunmen looted the agency's medical clinic in August. "Sadly, it is the town's most vulnerable people, especially children, who suffer the most. It is vital that those affected by malnutrition are able to access free medical care...without it, many lives will be put at risk."

According to UNICEF, the health of Somali children is at high risk as escalating hostilities against aid work has continued to hamper aid delivery. Rozanne Chorlton, UNICEF representative to Somalia, said that in August the agency postponed the dispatch of hundreds of tonnes of life-saving nutritional supplies meant for the prevention and treatment of acute malnutrition in over 85 000 Somali children because of increased hostility towards aid organisations. The distribution of malaria prevention bednets to more than 100 000 women and children had also been disrupted.

Chorlton said the agency—whose compound in Jowhar was taken over by militants last May, with huge volumes of humanitarian supplies

and communication equipment destroyed—would need assurances from Somali authorities for the safe delivery and storage of supplies. Food aid deliveries have also been affected. In Jowhar, where WFP stopped food deliveries in June because of insecurity, officials said several thousands of internally displaced people (IDP) were facing a food crisis.

The latest surveys by UNICEF and other agencies indicate that emergency nutrition levels in several parts of the country have deteriorated further since January and now one in five children are acutely malnourished, while one in 20 are severely malnourished. Earlier this year, one in six children were acutely malnourished. Holleman said Somalia's acute malnutrition rates were the highest in the world and continued to worsen.

"Currently, an estimated 285 000 children under 5 years of age in Somalia are acutely malnourished, of which 70 000 are severely malnourished and are at an increased risk of death if they do not receive the appropriate specialist care", said an assessment report by UNICEF and other UN agencies.

Bastien Vigneau, UNICEF's chief of emergency in Somalia, told the UN news agency IRIN that south-central Somalia had a nutritional demand "above emergency thresholds". UNICEF and other agencies were trying to reach at least 150 000 children countrywide with acute malnutrition.

UNICEF, the lead agency in the provision of vaccines and essential drugs for maternal and child health clinics, with health posts targeting 1.2 million children younger than 5 years and 1.4 million women in south-central Somalia, said thousands of lives would be put at risk if it was unable to operate fully and to deliver supplies without disruption.

Somalia has had no effective national government since the President Siad Barre was ousted in 1991. Over the past few years, Somalia's neighbours have tried to form an interim government bringing

together various political and military groups, but the effort has failed to end the fighting. The interim government, which controls only a small portion of the country mainly around the capital Mogadishu, is largely guarded by 4300 ill-funded African Union troops from Burundi and Uganda.

Increasingly, the African Union peacekeepers have come under attack from the Al Shabaab fighters who want them out of the country. Bahoku-Barigye, spokesman of the peacekeepers, told *The Lancet* that besides having to attend to their own fighters injured in attacks, their doctors work around the clock on treating desperate Somalis caught up in the fighting.

In the early days of the peacekeepers' deployment, the medical soldiers treated wounded Somalis more as a public relations exercise. The escalation in fighting and the cutback in aid workers' access to certain areas have forced hundreds of injured Somalis to stream into the peacekeepers' quarters to seek treatment. "We get overwhelmed by the numbers of those seeking medical assistance but we can not turn them away", he said.

According to UN surveys, the people currently in humanitarian crisis include 1.4 million rural people affected by severe drought, 655 000 urban poor who continue to struggle with very high food and non-food prices, and more than 1.5 million IDPs who are fleeing from the fighting. Nutrition surveys state that the IDP populations are highly vulnerable, since IDPs often record higher median rates of global acute malnutrition, 20% compared with the non-IDP rates of 18%.

Aid workers said the 2009 rains have failed in 70% of the country, meaning that the food security situation in Somalia was not expected to improve substantially over the next 6 months and the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance would remain high.

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