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Food Crisis in Somalia Is a Famine, U.N. Says

By **JEFFREY GETTLEMAN**

MOMBASA, Kenya — The [United Nations](#) on Wednesday officially declared [Somalia](#)'s food crisis a famine in several parts of the country, with millions of people on the brink of starvation and aid deliveries complicated by the fact that Islamist militants aligned with Al Qaeda control the famine zones.

The combination of one of East Africa's worst droughts in 60 years and Somalia's relentless conflict has depleted the country's food supplies, and tens of thousands of Somalis have died of malnutrition-related causes in the past few months, the United Nations said.

"If we don't act now, famine will spread to all eight regions of southern Somalia," said Mark Bowden, the United Nations' humanitarian coordinator for Somalia. "Every day of delay in assistance is literally a matter of life or death."

Speaking at the United Nations, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that nearly half of Somalia's population — 3.7 million people— were now in crisis. A total of \$1.6 billion was needed to help, he added, with about \$300 million of it required in the next two months to mount an "adequate response."

The Islamist militants who forced Western aid organizations out of Somalia last year, right as the drought was looming, are now urging the groups to return. But aid officials are wary, citing the dozens of [workers who have been killed](#) in Somalia in recent years. Also hampering the emergency efforts, aid officials contend, are American government rules that prohibit material support to the militants, who often demand "taxes" for allowing aid deliveries to pass through.

Somalia has lurched from crisis to crisis since 1991, when the central government imploded. In 1992, the same elements of drought and war set off a famine that killed hundreds of thousands of people and started a cycle of international intervention that, despite billions of dollars and more than a dozen transitional governments, has yet to stabilize the country.

Today, pastures have dried up, and the animals that Somali nomads survive off of are dying in

droves. Food prices are escalating, and after 20 years of anarchy, coping mechanisms are collapsing, with many families driven from their land and many breadwinners cut down in Somalia's endless iterations of civil war.

Many of those who can are fleeing the country, using what little money they have to pay for buses or simply walking, often hundreds of miles through the desert with children slung across their backs. Thousands of Somalis have been streaming across the borders of Kenya and Ethiopia every day, and many children arrive too far gone to be saved. In the Dadaab refugee camp along the Kenya-Somalia border, the hospitals are full of emaciated babies taking their last breaths.

United Nations officials are cautious about using the word famine, and in the past 20 years, only a handful of humanitarian emergencies have qualified, including in Sudan in 1998, Ethiopia in 2001 and Niger in 2005.

According to the United Nations, a famine is declared when "acute malnutrition rates among children exceed 30 percent, more than 2 people per 10,000 die per day and people are not able to access food and other basic necessities."

That is now the case in two regions of southern Somalia, southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle, both controlled by the militant group the Shabab. But throughout the country people are on the verge of running out of food. In the wider Horn of Africa, which includes Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea, more than 10 million need emergency rations to survive, American officials said. Many of these people are also at risk for cholera and measles.

The famine was neither sudden nor a surprise. Last year, weather forecasts financed by the American government predicted dangerously low rainfall in many areas of the Horn of Africa. Aid organizations are now using the United Nations' declaration of a famine as a rallying call for lifesaving help, yet at the same time, aid officials said they were furious that the situation had been allowed to deteriorate to this stage.

"There has been a catastrophic breakdown of the world's collective responsibility," said Fran Equiza, a regional director at Oxfam, one of the world's largest aid organizations. "The warning signs have been seen for months, and the world has been slow to act."

Mr. Ban also said "the United Nations has been sounding the alert for months."

Johnnie Carson, the assistant secretary for African affairs at the State Department, said the American government was trying to alleviate the longstanding cycles of droughts and famines with a program called Feed the Future, which intends to raise agricultural productivity and help

“populations in adapting to increasing erratic weather patterns.” Many scientists have placed the blame for the current drought on [global warming](#) and climate change.

The “crisis in the Horn will not end next week or next month,” Mr. Carson said.

He rejected the assertion that American government rules banning material aid to the Shabab were complicating aid efforts, though that is what United Nations agencies and several private aid groups that used to work in Somalia have said. Aid officials have worried that paying so-called taxes to the militants who control needy areas [could expose them to criminal prosecution](#).

“The issue and the problem is Al Shabab,” Mr. Carson said.

Reuben Kyama contributed reporting from Nairobi, Kenya, and Neil MacFarquhar from the United Nations.