

Worst famine in decades killing tens of thousands (+photos, video)

By Katharine Houreld

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Tens of thousands of Somalis are feared dead in the world's worst famine in a generation, a crisis so severe that the United States will allow emergency funds to be spent in areas controlled by al-Qaeda-linked militants as long as the fighters do not interfere with aid distributions.

Exhausted, rail-thin women are stumbling into refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia with dead babies and bleeding feet, having left weaker family members behind along the way.



Children are among the hardest hit. Photo / AP

"Somalia is facing its worst food security crisis in the last 20 years," said Mark Bowden, the United Nations' top official in charge of humanitarian aid in Somalia. "This desperate situation requires urgent action to save lives ... it's likely that conditions will deteriorate further in six months."

The crisis was the worst since 1991-92, when hundreds of thousands of Somalis starved to death, Bowden said. That famine prompted intervention by an international peacekeeping force, but it eventually pulled out after two American Black Hawk helicopters were shot down in 1993.

Since then, Western nations have mainly sought to contain the threat of terrorism from Somalia – an anarchic nation where the weak Government battles Islamic militants on land and pirates hijack ships for millions of dollars at sea.

Oxfam said US\$1 billion (\$1.19 billion) was needed for famine relief. Yesterday, the US announced an additional US\$28 million in emergency funding on top of the US\$431 million in assistance already given this year.

Most importantly, as long as the Islamists do not interfere with aid distributions, those new US funds are not restricted under rules implemented in 2009 that are designed to keep food and money from being stolen by the insurgency.

"If [the insurgents] are willing to allow access, we are willing to stand fully with the humanitarian actors," said Dr Raj Shah, head of the US Agency for International Development.

Aid groups have repeatedly called for the restrictions to be lifted and say the rules severely limited their operations in the past two years. US humanitarian contributions in Somalia fell from US\$237 million in 2008 to US\$29 million last year.

Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations, blamed al-Shabaab for exacerbating the crisis.

"The reason the aid hasn't gone in sufficient quantities into south and central Somalia is because al-Shabaab has prevented those capable of delivering large quantities of aid from having access – and when they have had access they've taxed them, harassed them, killed them, kidnapped them," Rice said.

Somalia is the most dangerous country in the world to work in, according to the UN's World Food Programme, which has lost 14 relief workers in the past few years. Kidnappings, killings and attacks on aid convoys occur frequently.

Two years ago the WFP pulled out of Islamist-controlled southern Somalia after the rebels demanded cash payments and other concessions.

WFP head Josette Sheeran said the agency was willing to return to southern Somalia if the insurgents guaranteed safe passage and free access to aid. Two regions of Somalia – Bakool and Lower Shabelle – are suffering from famine and eight more are at risk.

"We are absolutely fully committed to going where the hungry are," Sheeran said.

The Horn of Africa is suffering a devastating drought compounded by war, neglect, poor land policies and spiralling prices. Oxfam said some areas in the region had not had such a low rainfall in 60 years.

Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti have all been badly affected, and Eritrea is also believed to be suffering, although its repressive Government does not release figures.

Yet only parts of Somalia are technically suffering from famine, defined as when two adults or four children per 10,000 people die of hunger each day and a third of children are acutely malnourished.

Bowden said that in some areas of Somalia, six people were dying each day and more than half of children were acutely malnourished.

Prices of staple foods had increased 270 per cent over the past year, compounding the misery.

Somalia's civil war was partly to blame, said Joakim Gundel, who heads Katuni Consult, a Nairobi company often asked to evaluate international aid efforts in Somalia.

He said aid groups found fundraising easier if they blamed natural disaster rather admitting the emergency was partly caused by a complex, 20-year civil war worsened by international apathy and incompetence.

"There is no clear-cut answer," he said. "People are suffering and there is a need to respond. But drought is not the only cause. Conflict is a key reason."

– AP

DEFINITION OF FAMINE

The UN declares famine when more than 30 per cent of children are acutely malnourished, more than two people in every 10,000 die per day and people have no food or other basic necessities

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