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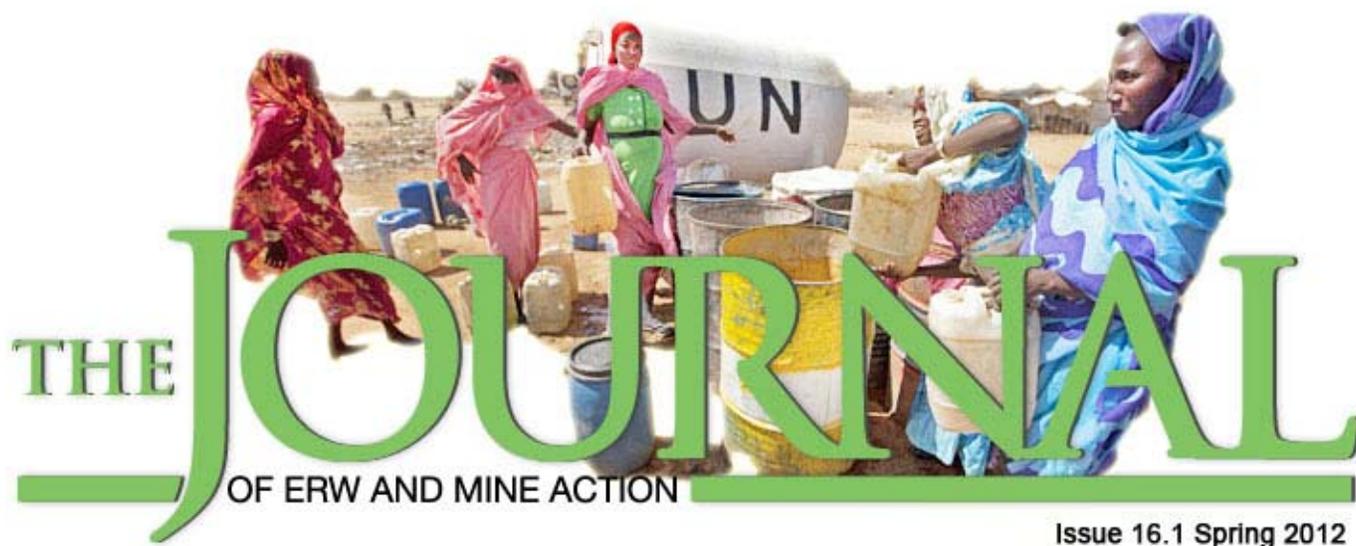
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[Table of Contents](#)
[Editorial](#)
[Focus](#)
[Special Report](#)
[Notes](#)
[Book Reviews](#)
[Briefs](#)
[Country Profiles](#)
[Journal Home](#)
[CISR Home](#)

Somalia Famine: Terrorism and Landmines Hinder Aid

Drought, rising food prices, famine and conflict have forced thousands of Somalis to flee to neighboring countries or become internally displaced. Aid agencies continue delivering food, but the ongoing conflict between al-Shabab and Somali government forces makes additional help difficult. The landmine threat further exacerbates the crisis, contributing to food insecurity, endangering refugees and threatening aid agencies trying to reach those in need.

Throughout the Horn of Africa, hundreds of thousands of Somalis live in massive refugee camps after fleeing what the U.N. refugee chief, António Guterres, called Earth's "worst humanitarian disaster."¹ Seeking food and shelter, approximately 750,000 Somalis traveled to neighboring Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, while another 1.5 million people became internally displaced.² Fueled by the region's worst drought in 60 years, soaring food prices and armed conflict between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government and the insurgent group al-Shabab, the ongoing crisis has led several Somali regions to be declared famine zones.³ According to *The Christian Post*, "Nearly half a million children in Somalia are acutely malnourished and tens of thousands of Somalis have already died in southern Somalia."⁴ Regional insecurity and attacks from insurgents hindered efforts by aid agencies to stave off the famine. In addition, food meant for starving civilians was stolen by "corrupt government officials and businessmen," according to *The Christian Post*, as recently as November 2011.⁴ The presence of landmines throughout Somalia further worsens the crisis by endangering the lives of refugees leaving Somalia and aid workers operating in the region. According to the *Landmine & Cluster Munitions Monitor*, landmine casualties in Somalia in 2010 increased from 126 to 159 (an increase of 26 percent) compared to the 2009 figure.⁵

Drought and Famine

The East African drought has its origins in a drier-than-expected rainy season in 2010, which led to a reduction in crop outputs and the desiccation of pastoral lands in early 2011. A simultaneous increase in global food prices only worsened the situation. The price of sorghum, a staple food for many Somalis, rose by nearly 240 percent, while the price of maize in neighboring Kenya increased threefold since the beginning of the drought.⁶ Increases in food prices placed considerable strain on the ability of Somalis, 43 percent of whom live on less than a dollar a day, to afford enough food to eat.⁷ The famine has left more than 12 million people in need of immediate assistance in the Horn of Africa.⁸

Besides destroying crops, the drought decimated a large portion of Somalia's livestock by depleting grazing land and water supplies.⁹ For many Somalis, livestock is a primary asset that can ensure a family's survival. For instance, a Somali family would be able to consume or sell their livestock, or its byproducts (such as milk), in order to buy food.

With 60 percent of the country's livestock dead, many poor families lost their most valuable asset and with it, any hope of a sustainable food supply.⁶

As a result of the famine, thousands of Somalis fled to refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. The Dadaab camp in Kenya, the largest refugee camp in the world, is home to about 400,000 refugees.² In order to reach this camp and others like it, Somalis must travel for days in arid heat while suffering from dehydration and malnutrition. Traveling with sick and/or dying children can put the entire family at risk. Consequently, to save the rest of the family some mothers had to abandon their dying children along the roads when these children were too weak to continue the journey.¹⁰ Upon arriving at the camps, many refugees face the brink of death and desperately need food, water and medical attention. The extreme conditions of the famine have resulted in a mortality rate of seven deaths per 10,000 people per day, whereas the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification defines famine as having a lack-of-food death rate of two per 10,000 per day.^{11,12}



Somalia, July 2011.
Photo courtesy of IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation/Turkey.

The famine's effects in Somalia were compounded by the presence of al-Shabab, an armed militia that has waged an insurgency against the Transitional Federal Government since 2006 and controls a large portion of southern Somalia.¹³ The militants blocked the delivery of food aid, discouraged Somalis from leaving the country and accused the United Nations of exaggerating its declarations of famine. In 2009, al-Shabab banned foreign aid agencies from operating in Somalia, claiming that the agencies were motivated by political agendas and comprised spies.¹⁴

Piracy and Insecurity Hampers Aid Flow

As humanitarian agencies struggle to deliver aid to Somalia's famine-stricken areas, they must face the security threat posed by al-Shabab. This is not the first time, however, that insurgent groups have affected the work of aid agencies. Between 1997 and 2005, Somalia surpassed Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan in reports of attacks against aid workers.¹⁵ The World Food Programme halted its Somali operations after militants killed 14 of its employees between 2008 and 2010 in what the WFP called "unprecedented and inhumane attacks."¹⁶ Despite al-Shabab's ban on its organization, the WFP resumed operations in northern and central Somalia and airlifted aid into Mogadishu.¹⁷

The WFP is not the only organization al-Shabab targeted; *Médecins Sans Frontières* was also attacked. In March 2011, MSF's compound in Medina, Mogadishu was hit with grenades in two separate incidents prompting the organization to withdraw from the area. MSF says it cannot continue efforts in Medina until it can ensure that its employees can work under safe conditions.¹⁸

Insecurity and attacks on aid organizations like the WFP and MSF prevent aid from reaching the approximately 2.2 million people living in al-Shabab-controlled territory.¹⁶ Al-Shabab's presence has made aid-delivery efforts difficult, as the group is known to intercept aid or prevent it from entering Somalia. In August 2011, the al-Shabab militia prevented aid from being delivered to the Dahabshil refugee camp in the town of Kismayo. An officer from the militia stated that the aid was turned away because al-Shabab did not pre-approve it.¹⁹

Another threat to the work of aid agencies is piracy in Somalia. Somali pirates have prevented and delayed food aid from reaching Somalia, exacerbating the region's drought and famine.²⁰ This also increases the price of food and transportation, and damages local shipping and fishing industries. Legislation to protect Somali waters is an important step in addressing the issue, but enacting this legislation will be a long and difficult process.

When assistance reaches Somalia, insecurity and inadequate oversight of aid distribution can cause the aid to fall into the wrong hands. A 2010 U.N. report found that only 50 percent of food aid that reaches Somalia goes to those who need it most.²¹ Rebel groups usually intercept the other 50 percent; they either keep it for themselves or sell it. In August 2011, the WFP stated that thousands of stolen food-aid sacks were found for sale in markets throughout Mogadishu. Many of these markets were located in the same neighborhoods as refugee camps filled with people in need.²²



A U.S. Marine hands a sack of grain to a Somali woman.
Photo courtesy of www.expertinfantry.com

Landmines in Somalia

Landmine and unexploded-ordnance contamination is widespread in Somalia and along the Ethiopian border. Although a lack of security prevents mine-action organizations from conducting thorough surveys, southcentral Somalia suffers from extensive contamination.²³ For instance, in Mogadishu mine/explosive-remnants-of-war casualties are reported almost daily. While always a threat, landmines are especially harmful during droughts because they contribute to food insecurity by restricting civilians from using the land to grow crops and raise livestock. Landmines also restrict aid movement and endanger refugees as they travel to and from refugee camps. However, demining organizations, such as Mines Advisory Group and the Danish Demining Group, have been active in southcentral Somalia.²³

Food security. Access to arable land, grazing pastures and trade routes to local markets is imperative to Somalia's food security. Before a landmine impact survey has identified hazardous areas, the suspicion of landmine contamination may inhibit farmers from gaining access to valuable agricultural resources. Landmines prevent farmers from cultivating once arable land and block access to water sources. Landmines also threaten nomadic herders who travel across wide swaths of pasture with their livestock.²⁴ In March 2011, for example, two herdsman and their donkeys were killed when a landmine exploded in Somalia's Gedo region.²⁵ For farmers who sell their crops in local markets, the presence of landmines along trade routes often forces them to take a different, longer route that increases travel time and ultimately increases food prices.²⁴ In addition, during the 2011 famine, landmines newly laid along the roads by insurgents endangered traders in Bakara, Mogadishu's largest market.²⁶



Ambia Mohammed looks after her daughter's children in the Dadaab camp in Somalia, the world's largest refugee camp. In recent months the rate of new arrivals has increased dramatically due to the added factor of drought that is affecting the region.
Photo courtesy of Andy Hall, Oxfam Italia.

Landmines threat. Landmines pose a serious threat to aid agencies working in Somalia's famine-stricken regions. Aid agencies work in landmine-contaminated Mogadishu and must cross the Somali-Ethiopian border, which contains 70 percent of Somalia's landmines.²⁷ In April 2011, at least one person died and seven were injured when an aid convoy hit a landmine in Somalia's Bakool region along the Somali-Ethiopian border.²⁸ Al-Shabab was subsequently blamed for laying mines in this region. On 25 October 2011, two Danish Demining Group members in a demining unit were kidnapped. They were subsequently rescued by U.S. Special Forces on 25 January 2012.²⁹

Landmines endanger refugees. Landmines threaten displaced persons traveling to refugee camps and returning to their homes after a crisis. Seeking safety, migrating refugees risk traveling into unfamiliar, landmine-contaminated territory and may have no choice but to travel along contaminated routes. In the Dollo Ado region of Ethiopia, home to several refugee camps, landmines laid

along a key route to the region endanger thousands of refugees.³⁰ In Somalia's Gedo region, at least 10 refugees died when their bus hit an anti-tank landmine en route to Kenya in April 2011.³¹

In 1991, landmine incidents significantly increased as Somali refugees returned to Somalia from Ethiopia.³² After the withdrawal of al-Shabab from Mogadishu in August 2011, many people who fled the capital were prompted to return. Somalia may experience an upsurge in landmine incidents as refugees return to certain areas of Mogadishu, because it is believed that al-Shabab mined and booby-trapped the areas during its retreat.³³

Conclusion

Amidst the starvation and violence, glimmers of hope have emerged. With al-Shabab's withdrawal from Mogadishu and the creation of a special forces unit to protect aid convoys and internally displaced persons, the capital has become a safer and more secure place for aid agencies to operate and for Somalis to take refuge.³⁴ To prevent mortality and malnutrition rates from increasing over the next several months, however, Somalia needs more funding for relief efforts. The United Nations obtained only half of the estimated US\$1.4 billion needed to fight the famine, which is partly due to the fact that the number of people requiring aid continues to increase more rapidly than the contributions coming in.⁸ On 3 February 2012, the U.N. downgraded the situation in Somalia from a "famine" to a

"humanitarian emergency," which means the situation has improved over recent months. How the humanitarian crisis unfolds will be determined by whether the U.N. can acquire adequate funding and whether the Transitional Federal Government can protect aid workers and refugees from insurgents. ↗

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Endnotes

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