

Stories from the Hunger Frontlines

Drought and Famine in the Horn of Africa

July 2011

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18 June 2011

Somalia's starving pour into violent city

By Peter Greste - BBC News, Somalia

Despite reports that the humanitarian crisis in Somalia is easing after 20 years of war, it remains the ultimate failed state - a land of banditry and piracy, where crop failures and a shortage of food force people into the violent city of Mogadishu.

The mayor of Mogadishu insists his city is not the most dangerous place in the world.

In fact, Mohamed Nur reckons it is not as bad as Kabul or even Baghdad.



A million people are thought to have been killed during 20 years of war

"Of course it's not as safe as we'd like it to be," he tells me. "But we are making progress."

" The rattle, pop and thump of gunfire is so pervasive that locals grimly call it 'Mogadishu music' "

Calling it "safe" might be a stretch.

The mayor has a street lighting programme. I know because I see the lights flicker on the only three blocks he has done, as we drive past in an armoured troop carrier.

His council is also collecting rubbish and opening new markets. I will have to take his word for it, though. Our minders from a force of African Union troops earnestly shake their heads when I ask if we can see these initiatives.

What if we follow the mayor for a while? He has his own heavily-armed bodyguards after all.

"Um... no," comes the reply. Still too dangerous.



Somalis live as nomads as they constantly flee fighting

Can we walk the 100m (109 yards) between the ministry of information and the prime minister's office then? Not without flak jackets and an armoured vehicle.

The rattle, pop and thump of gunfire is so pervasive that locals grimly call it "Mogadishu music".

I lose count of the number of times bullets zip past like angry lead hornets.

All that flying metal has chewed away the buildings so that vast districts now look like Stalingrad after its siege in World War II.

Except back then, they had heavy bombs and artillery to help with the work. In Mogadishu they have shredded the city with small arms.

Desperate choice

The Somali government can barely count the dead, never mind run the country.

Credible estimates reckon 20 years of war have cost a million lives. The country is haemorrhaging about 10,000 refugees a month. And how do those who are left manage to survive?

I ask Maryam Ahmed, a forlorn 37-year-old mother of seven, who once dreamed of becoming a teacher.

"We don't survive," she tells me from behind exhausted eyes. "We exist."

Maryam belongs to an underclass of urban nomads, people who have stripped their lives to a few precious pots and clothes they can sling in a blanket, and run with whenever the frontlines shift.

She lost her husband two years ago.

And I mean lost him. When Maryam and her children fled from the advancing front, he promised to follow with a few more possessions. She has not seen him since.

Now they compete with a million or so others to exist in Mogadishu.

So why do its wretched inhabitants not simply run from this hell on Earth? Paradoxically, they are pouring in.

Rural people struggling with the worst drought in living memory are being forced to make a desperate choice - risk a slow death by starvation in the countryside or, lured by a meal from an aid agency, a quick one amid the violence of the city.

Hundreds of thousands are opting for the city.

Cancerous war

So how did Somalia get into this state?

A force of radical Islamists called al-Shabab is fighting to overthrow what passes for the government.

Al-Shabab has close ties to al-Qaeda. It has a ready supply of arms and ammunition. And it has already grabbed half the country.

The lack of any functioning state has allowed piracy to flourish and the politicians - who call themselves "the government" - are fighting to hold on to their half of Mogadishu.

They simply could not survive without 8,000 African Union troops holding the rebels back.

MI5 believes it is only a matter of time before al-Shabab takes its war to the West.

Now, if you believe the African Union, the Somali government and its Western sponsors, things are more or less under control. Al-Shabab is gradually weakening, humanitarian access is opening up, and the government's influence is expanding.

But the view from Maryam's hovel looks very different.

Al-Shabab can and does operate almost at will across the city. No place is safe.

The only humanitarian aid is one bowl of maize porridge a day for Maryam and the kids, and she is too afraid to say what she really thinks of the government and its politicians.

If there was a force of radical Islamists who had declared an interest in attacking the West, and a humanitarian crisis threatening hundreds of thousands of people anywhere else, there would be benefit rock concerts and emergency talks at the United Nations.

But not here.

This is a slow-burner - a cancer that has quietly grown over two decades, in a place the rest of the world does not seem to care about. Except when Somali pirates prevent them from sailing their ships safely past.

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BBC - 4 July 2011

Horn of Africa tested by severe drought

Millions of people in the Horn of Africa are facing severe shortages of food as the worst drought in the region for six decades withers crops and kills livestock, as the BBC's world affairs correspondent Mike Wooldridge reports.

"I had a herd of 200 cows. I took them to Ethiopia when the drought started. All the cows I had taken there died and I came back without a single cow."

That story told by a resident of Wajir district in northern Kenya might not immediately appear to symbolise the humanitarian emergency increasingly gripping swathes of East Africa and the Horn of Africa - in the way that the rapidly growing number of acutely malnourished children trekking out of Somalia does.

But the distress being experienced by pastoralist communities across the affected region also goes a long way in explaining the severity of the current drought, its impact and the limits to the strategies people use to try to protect their livelihoods in such circumstances.

The Wajir cattle herder acted when he saw the grazing for his precious animals drying up.

But in the area of Ethiopia he took them to there turned out to be no greater chance of saving them. They started dropping dead, he says, one by one.

Aid officials estimate that up to half a million cattle have been lost in Ethiopia this year.

It often takes pastoralists at least two years to recover from a severe drought, particularly where it means building up a milking herd again.



Thousands of Somalis have arrived at Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp in recent weeks

This year's drought has hit hard when many people have not yet recovered from the last serious drought in 2009.

And the more marginalised the communities - and many of them are - the more likely people are to be pushed over the edge.

Food 'safety net'

On top of this, the cost of food is higher than at any time since the price crisis of three years ago.

This deeply alarming combination of factors has resulted in acute malnutrition affecting 35-40% of children under five in a lot of places, according to aid officials - twice the threshold that requires an emergency response.

In parts of southern Somalia - where the conflict between the Islamist extremist group al-Shabab and the Western-backed but weak government make aid operations so difficult - the real level of malnutrition is simply unknown.

One Nairobi-based aid official said: "In southern Somalia, it is not inappropriate to start worrying about it becoming a famine."

There have been many pledges over the years that lessons have been learnt from the humanitarian crises of the past - all the more relevant for this region of the world because of the history of famine in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.

In Ethiopia, there is now a food "safety net" scheme assisting some eight million people vulnerable to chronic food shortages.

They are often supplied for food in return for work, and the idea is that many can also get access to micro-credit and to ways of helping them generate their own income.

The advantage of supplying food aid on a planned basis and not just once an emergency has struck, aid officials say, is that it can help prevent the need to sell off livestock or take children out of school.

And the hope is that it helps to build up the resilience of people in vulnerable communities.

Early warning

Britain's Department for International Development promised an increased focus on this after a recent review of its response to humanitarian emergencies.

But even in a year of good weather conditions, Ethiopia still needs food assistance over and above the safety net scheme.

New government figures for the requirement in the light of the deepening drought are expected imminently.

This crisis will be a test, too, of the increased effort that has been made in recent years in Ethiopia to monitor and manage malnutrition among children in the community to reduce the numbers ending up in feeding centres during crises.

Famine early warnings - of the kind we are seeing now in East Africa and the Horn of Africa - and projects designed to help people resist the impact of disasters are not new, but they have attracted increasing attention.

Once it seemed highly likely that a drought described as "the worst in 60 years" would mean that the number of people affected would be similarly record-breaking - as potentially would be the number of deaths.

Now the hope is that this link is being broken and, given a sufficiently timely and adequate response, while such an emergency will still be very serious, those do not have to be the consequences.

But across parched lands and in countless hard-pressed communities - and almost certainly in Somalia above all - that is the challenge now.

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Horn of Africa drought: 'A vision of hell'

The UK's Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) has launched an emergency appeal to help the more than 10 million people affected by severe drought in the Horn of Africa. The BBC's Ben Brown reports from the Dadaab refugee camp in eastern Kenya, where more than 1,000 people arrive each day seeking help.



At a makeshift cattle market in the middle of the refugee camp, herdsmen are trying to sell off what little livestock they have left.

But no-one wants to buy the cattle and goats on sale here, for the chances are that very soon they will be dead.

There is nowhere for them to graze: the pastures here are parched and arid, and it has barely rained for two years running.

"I'm selling my cattle at knock-down prices," said one man. "I'm practically giving them away."

Not far away, the landscape is littered with the carcasses of dead animals.

In this part of the world, livestock are everything: they represent a family's entire assets, capital, savings and income. When the animals die, it frequently means the humans do as well.

Across the sprawling mass of the Dadaab refugee camp - some 50 km sq (19 sq miles) - there are several graveyards now, full of small mounds of earth, where chronically malnourished Somali refugees have been buried.

Usually the graves are horribly small: infant mortality in this camp has risen threefold in the last few months, according to the United Nations.

Infants - children aged five and under - are especially vulnerable to malnutrition and all the illnesses and diseases which frequently accompany it, such as pneumonia and diarrhoea.

With more than 1,000 refugees arriving here every day, Dadaab is becoming overcrowded and insanitary. The camp director told me there could soon be half a million people here - more a city than a refugee camp.

Many of the new arrivals have walked for days or weeks to get here, desperate to escape not only from the drought in Somalia but also its endless civil war.

The children especially are malnourished and dehydrated when they finally get here. The tragic irony is that some of them will die within a day or so of their arrival.

Crisis frontline

Katharina Andrey, a Swiss nurse from the medical aid agency Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), has the job of helping to prioritise which children need the most help the quickest.

Babies are measured and weighed - often they yelp and scream as they are placed into a large black plastic bucket so that their weight can be read.

Sometimes babies of six months or a year weigh little more than newborns.



Some mothers are letting the weakest children die, while they try to save the stronger ones

Ms Andrey is on the frontline of this unfolding crisis - one woman surrounded by a sea of faces, working frantically to save lives, while winds whip up dust clouds around her and babies scream and vomit.

"I arrived here a few days ago and my first reaction was: 'Oh my God'," she told me.

Ms Andrey rushes around, handing out high-energy biscuits and checking which babies need to be taken to one of the camp's clinics.

Recently, a child she was trying to save didn't make it and she grieved alongside the mother.

"The baby was dying. I tried to do something but it just died in my arms and that is really hard to cope with, I just cried with the mother. It may be hard to go back to work but it can be a motivation as well because I am here to improve things. "

But sometimes, Ms Andrey has to persuade mothers to go with their severely malnourished children to hospital.

'World doesn't listen'

Frequently, they do not want to go - they say they need to forage for food, water and firewood for their other children - often as many as seven or eight - and they cannot afford to be away from their families.

To some mothers, the weak, malnourished child has become a burden and they are prepared to let it die - a sacrifice in order to save their other children.

Aid workers like Abubakar have to negotiate hard with mothers to convince them to change their minds.

"Some families had already prepared children for death and we had to intervene and tell them: 'No, this is not possible, this child is still alive and he can make it, so you have to give us a chance to try.' So we have to negotiate with them. It's hard but sometimes we win."

The place to which he wants to take the most seriously ill children is MSF's intensive therapeutic feeding centre.

Inside, it is a vision of hell.

Tiny, emaciated children with wrinkled skin hanging off their bones, rib cages jutting out, bulbous eyes gazing out forlornly, flies covering their faces - the all-too-familiar images of African hunger.

"Some of them die on the way, some die in the wards," said Dr Christopher Karisa. "What we are doing here can seem like a drop in the ocean but the ocean will be a drop less if we don't do it. It's a challenge, a really big challenge."

But how could this be happening again, in July 2011?

One aid worker told me: "We were supposed to have an early warning system but what is the point of warning the rest of world when it doesn't listen?"

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East Africa drought: Somalis engulf Ethiopian town

By Mike Wooldridge BBC News, Dollo-Ado, on Ethiopia-Somalia border

This small, remote border town is rapidly becoming one of the focal points of the drought emergency in the Horn of Africa.

Two thousand or so Somali refugees who are now arriving here each day from across the border are forcing a long-running refugee assistance operation to be ramped up to deal with this emergency.

And aid officials acknowledge that it is a severe challenge. From early morning until the evening - in corrugated shelters alongside a sandy, stony track running from the border a few hundred metres away - the new arrivals are registered.

They stand or sit outside the shelters patiently waiting for their turn, which is announced by an official through a loudspeaker. It is a critical part of the operation, opening the way to the assistance they will be entitled to.

High-energy food

But it is a bottleneck. At present some may be waiting for two or three days, and an effort is now under way to speed up the process.

While I was there, a medical worker did go through the throng of people, measuring the circumference of the children's arms to spot cases of serious malnutrition. It is at alarming levels in the children now being brought across from Somalia.

The medical worker reached Owlio's nine-month-old son Mahmoud. His arm was so thin that the colour-coded circumference measurement was unquestionably red - meaning severe acute malnutrition.

Mahmoud had become like this just recently, his mother said, and she was very worried about him.

Such children receive special high-energy food when they are discovered.

But like every other aspect of the relief operation, the challenge is to keep up the pace.

Paul Spiegel, chief of public health with the UN refugee agency - who has been visiting Dollo-Ado and the refugee camps nearby - says the numbers are fluid, but up to 10% of the children are showing signs of severe acute malnutrition.



Some refugees have to wait for days to be registered to get assistance

And that is something, he says, he has not seen in a decade - and one of the reasons they are now responding "in a more forceful manner".

Filling up fast

One of the risks associated with malnutrition is increased susceptibility to infectious diseases.

The good news, Mr Spiegel points out, is that there has not been any measles outbreak nor any significant outbreak of diarrhoea.

But the potential for such outbreaks is adding to the pressure to get all the refugees into properly organised camps as quickly as possible and - crucially important - to step up the supply of water.

The problem at the moment is that camps are filling up as fast as they can be opened.

The Kobe camp, opened only on 24 June, is already nearing a capacity level of 20,000 that was set at least in part with the environment around the camp in mind.

In other similar situations, refugees cutting down trees for firewood has, for example, led to tension with local communities.



A number of the refugees I have spoken to say they intend to stay on this side of the border.

In every case, they say they were fleeing not only the drought but also conflict between Somalia's weak government and the al-Shabab Islamist militant group.

Mother's story

The UN High Commission for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, who visited the camp on Thursday, said it was through solving conflict in Somalia and bringing aid to Somalia itself that the crisis here could be

Refugee crisis



mitigated.

Since the beginning of 2011, around 15,000 Somalis each month have fled into refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia looking for food and water. The refugee camp at Dadaab, in Kenya, has been overwhelmed by an estimated 400,000 people.

Many involved in dealing with the emergency on the ground here would agree.

They say the reason so many refugees are arriving here in a bad shape is the lack of access aid organisations have had to them in Somalia.

Some attention is already being given here to longer-lasting shelter for the refugees - beyond the tents they are being housed in for now and to what will be needed to help them become more self-reliant.

I met one aid worker, who was dealing with trauma suffered by the refugees during their uprooting.

She is likely to be busy, to go by the example of one mother among the most recent arrivals, who said she had to leave her youngest child - a three year old - behind in Somalia because she feared he would hold back her flight with her other children.

She said she had no idea what would happen to him.

Horn of Africa drought: Why is Somalia worst affected?

By Peter Biles BBC world affairs correspondent

Somalia is a failed state by anyone's reckoning, and while no-one is questioning the severity of the current tragedy, it is another matter assessing just how bad it is.

Gathering accurate and comprehensive information from inside Somalia has been a challenge for 20 years now. The country has been without a national government since the overthrow of President Mohamed Siad Barre in January 1991. The latest drought in the Horn of Africa has thrown the region into even more chaos, and led to an unwelcome movement of Somalis into neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia.

It is being called "the worst drought in north-east Africa for 60 years".

However, given the dramatic changes in the region in that time, the description is largely meaningless.

This is certainly one of the driest years in decades, but beyond that it is impossible to make comparisons about the impact on the population of the Horn.

For one thing, the population of some countries has more than doubled in the last 30-40 years.

According to World Bank figures, the population of Ethiopia in 1973 was 31 million. Today, it is in excess of 80 million.

The UN World Food Programme (WFP) says that changing weather patterns have made droughts more common in the region.

"Communities that used to have the relative luxury of several years of regular rainfall to recover from the occasional year of drought are now learning to live in an almost constant state of food insecurity due to a lack of water," said WFP head Josette Sheeran.

More often than not, though, conflict has been a contributing factor at times of hardship.



The drought in the Horn of Africa has thrown the region into even more chaos

Fighting, food and famine

The 1973 famine in Ethiopia occurred against the background of a creeping coup against Emperor Haile Selassie.

The 1984 famine there came at the height of the war between the government of Col Mengistu Haile Mariam and Tigrayan rebels.

And the 1992 food crisis in Somalia occurred as the country was descending into anarchy.

This year, the food shortages in Somalia have been exacerbated by the lack of humanitarian access to many areas, and accompanied by a sharp increase in food prices.

However, the numbers in need of food assistance are not yet anywhere near the 1992 figures.

The UN says 10 million people are currently on the verge of starvation.

In 1992, prior to the US-led intervention in Somalia, the number of people needing help was reckoned to be more than 23 million.

So aid workers are trying to respond as best they can, without becoming bogged down in comparisons.

To contain the unfolding humanitarian situation in the camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, the United Nations and international aid agencies desperately need access to areas of Somalia where insecurity is rife and where the militant Islamist group, al-Shabab, is in control.

WFP says it withdrew from al-Shabab-controlled areas of southern Somalia at the beginning of 2010 because of threats to the lives of UN staff, and the imposition of unacceptable operating conditions, including the imposition of informal taxes and a demand that no female staff work there for the WFP.

Now though, the organisations which have found it difficult, if not impossible, to operate in areas held by al-Shabab, are looking at the possibility of returning to southern Somalia.

Islamist concessions

The insurgents have said that local and international aid agencies will be allowed to assist people affected by the drought.

The latest arrangements have still to be put to the test.

"Al-Shabab may be on the back foot in places," says one regional analyst.

Somalis fleeing to Kenya report that militants at checkpoints have tried to stop people leaving, but people are fleeing across the desert nonetheless.

The view from Ethiopia, one of the powerbrokers in the Horn of Africa, is that al-Shabab is desperate to use the drought as a means of regaining lost popularity and trust among local communities.

Both the US and UK describe al-Shabab, which has links to al-Qaeda, as a terrorist group.

It has fought Somalia's weak UN-backed Government and the African Union's peacekeepers since 2007.

Al-Shabab is thought to control much of southern Somalia, including the key Afgooi corridor that links the countryside in the south to the capital, Mogadishu.

It is reckoned to be stronger in the agricultural areas between the Juba and Shebelle Rivers, whereas the local clans tend to hold sway in the pastoral areas. The government claims to exercise authority in the far south, near the Kenyan border.

No soft landing

The insecurity, compounded by the drought, has led to migration in all directions in the region.



Somalis fleeing to Kenya report that militants at checkpoints have tried to stop people leaving

Uncharacteristically, Somalis have been streaming into camps set up in war-ravaged Mogadishu. Traditionally, city residents have taken refuge in the countryside when fighting in the capital has intensified.

Some people have been heading north to the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Others, of course, have been crossing into Kenya and Ethiopia.

It is also thought likely that people affected by drought in the Somali region of eastern Ethiopia have headed south into Kenya.

For those on the move, there is no soft landing anywhere.

North-eastern Kenya is an impoverished part of the country, historically neglected by government in Nairobi.

Much the same can be said about Ethiopia's attitude towards its Somali Region.

The third option, being internally displaced within Somalia, holds even greater risks for those who are vulnerable.

The late President Barre would scarcely recognise the country he ruled for more than 20 years, with perhaps one exception. Drought is still a recurring feature of life in the Horn.

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Horn of Africa famine: France warns of 'scandal'

The world has "failed to ensure food security", France's agriculture minister has said at the UN food agency crisis talks on East Africa's drought.

"If we don't take the necessary measures, famine will be the scandal of this century," AFP news agency quotes Bruno Le Maire as saying in Rome.

More than 10m people are thought to be at risk of starvation and famine has been declared in two areas of Somalia.

Ahead of the summit, the World Bank pledged \$500m (£307m) to help.

Some \$12m will be for immediate assistance to those worst hit by what the UN says is East Africa's worst drought in 60 years.

But the bulk of the money will go towards long-term projects to aid livestock farmers.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon has urged donor nations to supply an extra \$1.6bn in aid.

Earlier the Red Cross said it had delivered food to one of Somalia's worst-hit areas, which is controlled by Islamists.

Working through a local committee, the Red Cross delivered food for 24,000 people by lorry.

'Question of life and death'

Al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group which controls large swathes of south and central Somalia, had imposed a ban on foreign aid agencies in its territories in 2009, but has recently allowed limited access.

But the World Food Programme says it still cannot reach 2.2 million people inside Somalia as refugees continue to pour over the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders.

Somalia is thought to be worst-hit by the crisis, but Ethiopia and Kenya have also been affected.

Analysts say the drought has been caused by the lack of rains and the failure of governments to adequately finance agriculture and irrigation schemes.

The meeting of ministers from the G20 nations at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation headquarters in Rome was requested by France, the current chair of the G20 group of powerful economies.

"Our meeting is a question of life or death for tens of thousands of people," Mr Le Maire said at the start of the meeting, AFP reports.

Bob Geldof and other celebrity activists are urging the international community to come up with more cash.

They accuse some countries - Italy, France, the Arab states and Germany - of contributing too little in proportion to their national wealth.

Ethiopia safety-net

Mr Le Maire told the BBC said the first aim of the meeting was to co-ordinate the aid and response to the crisis.

Missing development



Development aid would focus on reducing deforestation, topsoil erosion and overgrazing and improving water conservation. New roads and infrastructure for markets would help farmers increase their profits.

"The second goal is also to think about the future and the long-term perspective because what we see here in Africa is that people need to have their own food and to have their own agriculture," he said.

BBC Africa analyst Martin Plaut says many people at the heart of the current disaster - in Ethiopia - have emerged relatively unscathed.

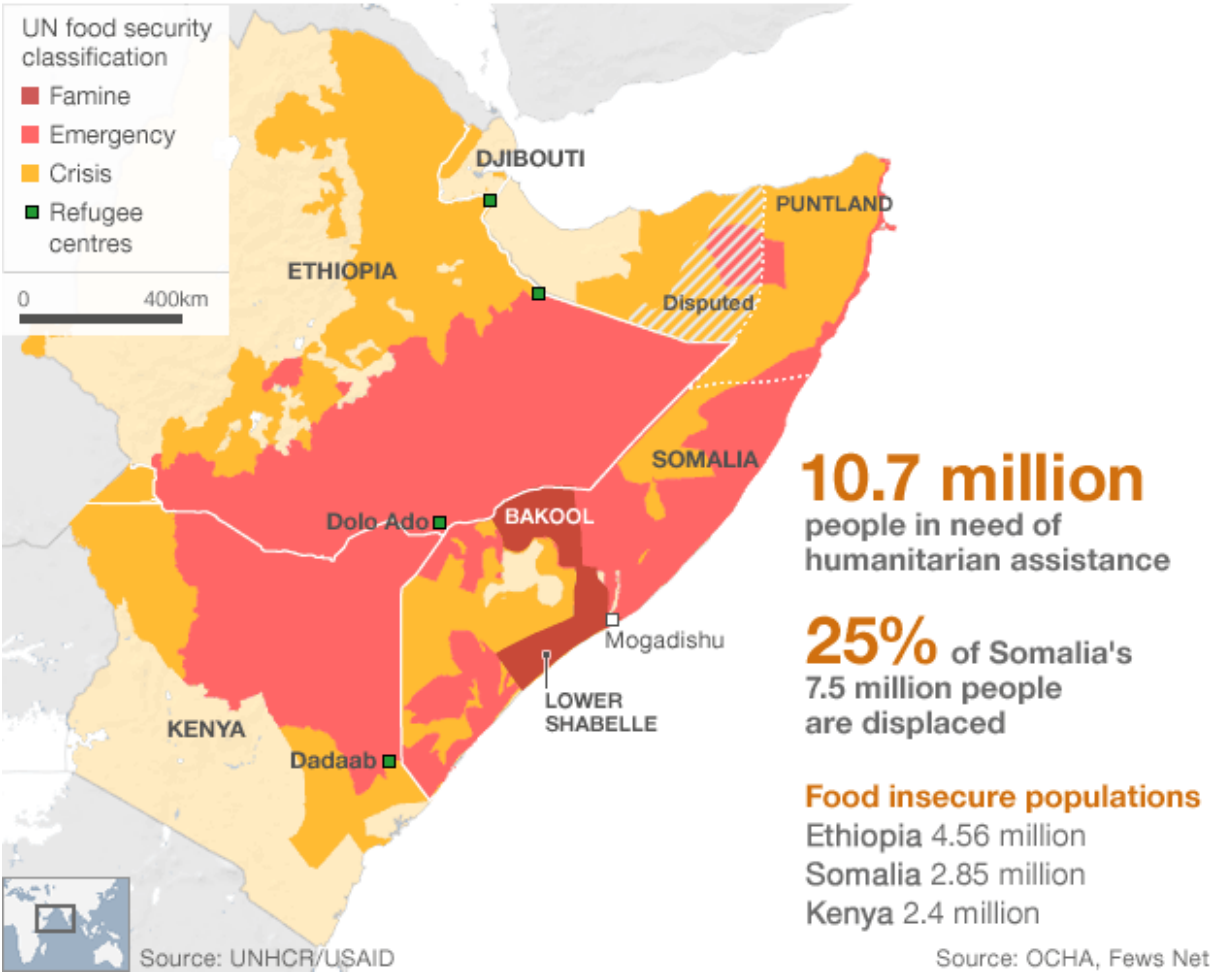
This is because the government in Addis Ababa has such an extensive safety net in place, he says.

Pre-positioned supplies mean the Ethiopian authorities could respond rapidly once the extent of the drought became clear.

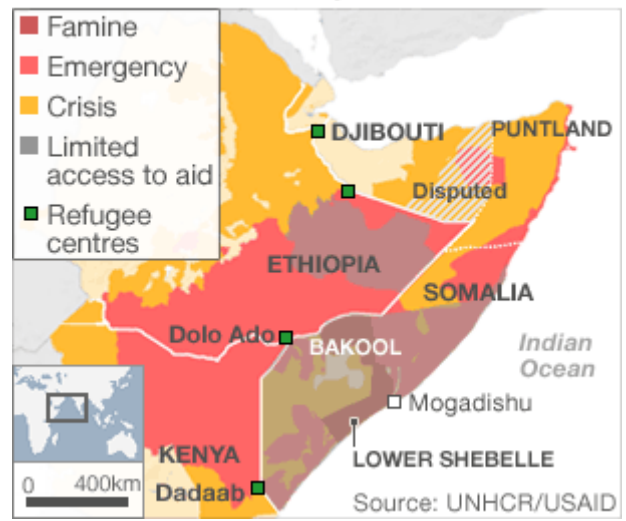
The first food distributions began in February and have continued to the worst affected communities across a vast area.

Communities are suffering, but the famine that has hit neighbouring Somalia has so far been avoided in Ethiopia and overall the disaster management system, built up since the 1980s, has worked.

Areas of food shortages



Areas of food shortages



Herdsmen struggling



Farmers unable to meet their basic food costs are abandoning their herds. High cereal and fuel prices had already forced them to sell many animals before the drought and their smaller herds are now unprofitable or dying.