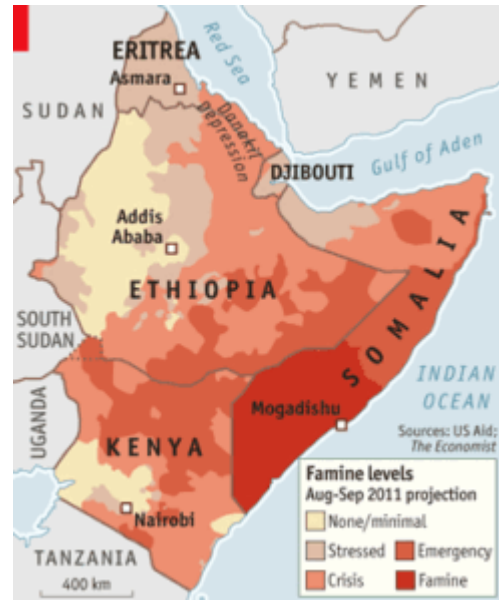


Famine in the horn of Africa: Beyond the headlines

by Joel Negin

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Source: The Economist

The Australian government has committed \$83.2 million to the humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa including food rations, shelter and nutritional support. This is a generous contribution that will help in relieving the worst impacts of the East African drought that is currently affecting more than 10 million people including as many as 2 million children in the region.

But with Australia providing such a significant amount of funding and the Foreign Minister making a high profile trip to the region, some more examination of the crisis is needed to understand the context and causes. The East African famine is extremely complex and multi-faceted and this piece represents only an introduction to the issue and some thoughts for discussion.

The United Nations has declared there to be a famine in the region according to the technical definition of two or more people out of 100,000 dying each day, and acute malnutrition among a third of young children. But large scale drought and hunger has become very common in this part of East Africa straddling Somalia, Northeastern Kenya, parts of Ethiopia and South Sudan. There have been large scale famines in 1974, 1984 and 2000 but the reality is that there has been a substantial food gap between need and availability almost every year over the past 20. For example, the World Food Programme has noted that only 30% of Somalia's food needs have been met from local production in the past five years. Somali sorghum, rice and wheat output has dropped precipitously since highs in the mid 1980s.

The United Nations has requested US\$1.6 billion to respond to the East African disaster but the UN Humanitarian Appeal for 2011 (developed in 2010) requested US\$530m for Somalia alone – demonstrating that they knew support would be

needed. The 2010 Humanitarian Appeal for Somalia requested US\$596m and the 2008 appeal said that US\$641m was needed for Somalia. Somalia's humanitarian needs are not a one-off.

The famine is indeed a horrible humanitarian catastrophe but it also represents a systematic failure to address the complex and difficult underlying causal factors. Emergency appeals are necessary to save lives but not enough is done to address the real and persistent political and ecological causes of the situation. Long droughts, lack of arable land (only 1.6% of Somalia's 637,657 km² is arable) and most obviously persistent conflict has rendered Somalia extremely prone to food insecurity. Somalia has not had a functioning central government for more than a decade and has been immersed in an ongoing battle between the fledgling administrators and al-Shabaab. The violence has spilled out into Kenya, Ethiopia and as far as Uganda creating regional instability.

Ultimately, in order to resolve the conflict and address the land pressures, the region requires political solutions. The food aid, which is much needed now, can only be a short-term band-aid on a festering wound. The current emphasis on the region by the global community is important but will need to be sustained in order for there to be any hope of longer term solutions. There is a glimmer of hope in Somalia. Two northern parts of the country, Somaliland and Puntland, have been functionally independent from the lawless south for more than a decade and have developed nascent institutions, held democratic elections and have achieved some economic growth.

The Australian government is making substantive investments in food security across Africa that can support production and agricultural markets. This is welcome, but in Somalia specifically, the solutions, if there are any, are not based on aid but on political engagement.

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