

Al Shabab militants ban starving Somalis from accessing aid

Somalia is suffering its worst drought in 40 years.

Mogadishu: Islamist militants in Somalia have imposed a ban on humanitarian assistance in areas they control, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to choose between death from starvation and disease or brutal punishment. In some towns, hungry and weak people have been ordered by extremist leaders to remain where they are to act as human shields against US air strikes.

Somalia is suffering its worst drought in 40 years, with the effects of climatic catastrophe compounded by war and poor governance.

Interviews with villagers in the swaths of land controlled by Al Qaida-affiliate Al Shabab, in the centre and south of the east African state, reveal a population on the brink of catastrophe, with children and older people already dying in significant numbers. Al Shabab has told people they will be punished — possibly executed as spies — if they have any contact with humanitarian agencies.

Strict British and US counter-terrorism laws are also discouraging humanitarian organisations from delivering vital emergency assistance, aid agencies have said.

Although aid officials say a huge international effort and donations by Somalia's vast diaspora have so far averted a repeat of the 2011 famine, when 250,000 people died, conditions in much of the country have continued to deteriorate in recent months.

An additional 500,000 people now need humanitarian assistance, bringing the total to 6.7 million.

Almost half of these people face starvation if they do not receive help. One reason for the high death toll six years ago was a blockade imposed by Al Shabab on humanitarian assistance by international and local NGOs that did not meet its strict criteria.

This time, Al Shabab appeared initially to adopt a more moderate policy, which analysts said suggested leaders were wary of being blamed once more for failing

to either provide or allow help to reach needy communities. However, its approach appears to have hardened since late June, possibly owing to internal power struggles.

Tiyeglow, a town in the Bakool region that is largely controlled by Al Shabab, has been badly affected, according to its government-appointed mayor. "People in Tiyeglow are starving. Al Shabab suddenly stopped aid agencies which were trying to reach hungry people in the town. That is why some of the residents began to flee to seek food aid," Ebrahim Abdi Rahman Mohammad said.

"Children under five are particularly in a very risky situation, because the malnutrition rate is going up, and if this blockade by Al Shabaab continues we will be witnessing more and more children dying," Mohammad warned.

A Save the Children survey published last month showed that the number of severe acute malnutrition cases had soared in four out of nine districts it assessed in southern and central Somalia. In the district of Mataban, 9.5 per cent of children aged under five were severely malnourished.

The survey focused on areas that are largely controlled by Al Shabab. Hassan Noor Saadi, Save the Children's country director in Somalia, said any aid reaching Al Shabab-controlled areas was "a very localised response". "These locations are getting perhaps 10 to 15 per cent of what is reaching places where there is government control or the presence of humanitarian actors," Saadi added. More than two million people — a fifth of the population of Somalia — live in areas controlled by Al Shabab.

The extremist group has repeatedly attacked aid workers and continues to launch daily strikes against government targets.

More than 700,000 people have already fled their homes in Somalia, 200,000 over the past two months.

Almost all have left Al Shabab-controlled territory in a desperate bid to find food or medical aid. Abdiya Barrow, a 48-year-old mother of seven who fled Tiyeglow, told the Guardian she had walked for seven days to reach the city of Baidoa, where her three youngest children were being treated by international medical teams for diarrhoea and malnutrition.

“When the drought began, Al Shabab told us that we could accept food only from aid agencies related to Islamic organisations, but eventually they said no. Anybody found bringing food aid will be killed because of suspicion that aid agencies might be affiliated to the [Somali] government,” Barrow said. “Life was extremely bad. There is no food and water. People were dying on a daily basis. The day I and my family left, a male neighbour and his young son starved and died.” In some towns, Al Shabaab leaders have stopped residents leaving their homes.

Mohammad Usman, who lives in Buale, a drought-hit town in Somalia’s Middle Juba region, said the group did not allow aid workers to operate there and had warned locals they would be punished if they attempted to arrange assistance from outside.

“[Al Shabaab] warned the residents not to move out, because they said they do not want the town to become empty, but ... there is nothing to eat.

A kilo of rice is nearly \$4. Who can afford that? Children and women are dying,” Osman said.

One woman in Buale, who requested anonymity owing to security concerns, said her four-year-old daughter died from diarrhoea last month. “My five-year-old son is now sick. He is severely malnourished. Al Shabaab is giving us nothing and yet they do not allow aid agencies to come to us. If you talk about the aid or call for aid, they even kill you by labelling you a spy,” she said.

Abdi Rahman Mohammad Hussein, the government official overseeing humanitarian aid in Jubaland, said the situation in Al Shabab-controlled areas was likely to deteriorate in coming weeks.

“The situation will turn into famine if the people in these towns do not get food very soon. We are very worried about the condition there.” Al Shabab is facing a new military campaign launched by Mohammad Abdullahi Mohammad, the president of Somalia, and supported by the US.

Hussein said the extremists used local populations as a human shield because they wanted to ensure towns remained “safe havens for Al Shabab militant leaders”.

“They do not want people to move out because they are worried that there could be an air strike if the civilians leave,” he added. A recent United Nations assessment said “Somalia is not yet out of the woods”, with other analyses suggesting that an “elevated risk of famine in 2017 persists”.

This year’s rainy season has been disappointing. Some parts of Somalia, already parched, have so far received only half of the usual rainfall. Donald Trump, the US president, recently designated Somalia a “zone of active hostilities”, allowing commanders greater authority when launching air strikes, broadening the range of possible targets and relaxing restrictions designed to prevent civilian casualties. He also authorised the deployment of regular US forces to Somalia for the first time since 1994. The US in effect pulled out of Somalia after 1993, when two helicopters were shot down in Mogadishu and the bodies of American soldiers were dragged through the streets.

Source: <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/somalia/al-shabab-militants-ban-starving-somalis-from-accessing-aid-1.2071927>

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