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Somalia: State-Building as if People Mattered

The Enough Project

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October 26, 2011

Summary: *The scale of the famine in Somalia demands a reordering of priorities in the country. The international community must temporarily redirect the pressure it is placing on Somalia's Transitional Federal Government, or TFG, insisting that it focus first and foremost on ensuring unimpeded access to famine victims in its areas of control. The international community must use humanitarian access in Mogadishu, not progress in advancing the political transition, as the key yardstick to judge the TFG's performance. Essential tasks in the political transition can still be advanced during the humanitarian crisis but should not be accorded top priority while a famine is raging.*

First things first. The most fundamental duty of any government is to provide its citizens with basic protection from physical threat and extreme deprivation, whether from war, criminal violence, or natural disaster. Everything else should come second.

Given the massive scale of the humanitarian crisis in Somalia, where 750,000 people are at immediate risk of famine and a total of 4 million—*half the total population*—needs emergency assistance, one would expect the Transitional Federal Government, or TFG, and other local Somali authorities to temporarily set aside other agendas and devote most of their energies to ensuring the effective flow of relief aid to famine victims. And one would expect the United Nations and international donors to insist on this ordering of priorities. Certainly Somali citizens have every right to demand this.

Instead, Somalia has been the scene of a stunning case of misplaced priorities this year. Rather than pressing the TFG to devote its full attention to gaining control over its predatory security forces and corrupt politicians so that food aid can reach the hundreds of thousands of displaced famine victims in Mogadishu, Western donor countries, the United Nations, and regional governments have instead pressured TFG leaders to focus on politics—namely power-sharing accords and implementation of key transitional tasks.¹

As a result, the past five months were devoted to a raft of political initiatives, including:

- The “Kampala Accord,” which brokered a new power-sharing deal between rivals President Sheikh Sharif and Speaker of Parliament Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden
- Agreement on a new “roadmap” to accelerate the transition
- The selection of yet another new prime minister and formation of yet another cabinet
- Establishment of a new committee on the constitution
- Regional and global summits on the mandate of the African Union peacekeepers and other political matters
- Meetings of the international contact group with the TFG
- Many foreign junkets by the TFG’s top leaders

Under normal circumstances, this preoccupation with advancing Somalia’s political transition would be entirely appropriate. The TFG—now in its seventh year of what was supposed to be a five-year transitional process—has achieved almost none of the critical transitional tasks required of it. Nor has it demonstrated much interest in building up the central government’s capacity to govern.

This “transition in perpetuity” in Somalia has become its own economy, allowing political elites and their supporters to enrich themselves with the trappings of sovereignty without having to trouble themselves with the vexing task of actually governing and without having to subject themselves to a popular referendum on their performance—elections. Deep international frustration with the recalcitrance of the TFG leadership has been a major driver of the insistence by donors and the United Nations for rapid progress to end the transition in Somalia.

But in the context of a massive famine, preoccupation with advancing the transition is misplaced. To Somalis and many outside observers, it comes across as a case of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. It diverts energies from the immediate crisis at hand. And it sends the wrong message to TFG leaders: that the yardstick used to assess the TFG’s legitimacy and viability is progress in drafting constitutions and establishing committees rather than protecting the lives of its own citizens. Make no mistake—to date, TFG leaders have come under far greater pressure from the international community to advance the political transition than to facilitate the flow of emergency relief in areas of the capital Mogadishu that are under their control.

The good news is that this is beginning to change. Almost every statement from U.N. officials and other international diplomats now includes an obligatory call for the TFG to ensure that food aid gets to famine victims in Mogadishu. U.S. diplomats insist that Mogadishu should be a model for effective relief operations and that the current situation is unacceptable.

But in routine diplomatic contact between the TFG and the outside world, the humanitarian crisis is still taking a back seat to the political transition. There is a big

difference between appending a reference to humanitarian access onto a statement or a resolution and prioritizing humanitarian access with forceful language both in public and behind the scenes.

Humanitarian response and state-building: A history of tension

There is a history behind the reluctance of international state-builders to privilege humanitarian aid in Somalia, and it is critical to understand if one is to make sense of the often contentious relationship between humanitarian and state-building agendas in Somalia.

In 2007, after an Ethiopian military occupation ousted the Islamic Courts Union and sparked an insurgency and counterinsurgency that devastated much of Mogadishu, the United Nations and donor states in the West threw considerable resources behind the TFG, hoping to make it a viable and legitimate alternative to radical Islamism. Humanitarian and development aid agencies came under tremendous political pressure to work with and through the TFG to build up its capacity and earn it “performance legitimacy” in the eyes of a skeptical Somali public.

The humanitarian groups resisted. They made three arguments that infuriated the U.N. political office and donor states.

First, they argued that the TFG was an active party in a war with Shabaab (the jihadist group in control of most of southern Somalia), and that forcing aid agencies to work through the TFG compromised their neutrality and made them a target of Shabaab attacks. Given the extraordinary number of humanitarian casualties in Somalia, concern for security of national and international staff was not a small matter.

Second, they observed that the TFG had almost no operational capacity, and that tethering aid agencies to a dysfunctional transitional government ensured failure of their operations.

Finally, they argued that the TFG was riddled with corruption and that it actually constituted the main impediment to effective delivery of aid.

The then-U.N. Special Representative to Somalia Ahmedou Ould-Abdulla launched a sharp rebuttal. He challenged the principle of humanitarian neutrality, claiming that in some circumstances a claim of neutrality is “complicit.”² He and others argued that endless humanitarian aid to Somalia had turned into an unacceptable substitute for a durable political solution, and he insisted that international policy on Somalia move beyond “humanitarian band-aids.”

Revival of a viable central government thus became the top priority among international diplomats; humanitarian aid that circumvented the TFG was seen as subversive. Some

observers went so far as to imply that humanitarian agencies appeared to prefer continued state collapse, since that way they had no sovereign state authority to answer to.

Both the humanitarian and state-building logics are compelling. They are also not mutually exclusive; there are certainly conditions in which humanitarian aid can and should build local administrative capacity, transparency, and responsiveness.

Under normal circumstances, a reasonable compromise could have been worked out. But the political context of Somalia in 2007 and 2008 was anything but normal. The massive destruction caused by the insurgency and counterinsurgency, the displacement of 700,000 Somalis in Mogadishu, and allegations of uncontrolled or disproportionate use of violence by all the armed groups in and around the capital—the TFG paramilitaries, Shabaab, clan militias, African Union peacekeepers, and Ethiopian forces—created a polarized and toxic political environment. Trust and communication between the state-building and humanitarian camps rapidly deteriorated. Humanitarian aid and state-building came, wrongly, to be seen as intrinsically at odds with one another.

That era has left a bitter legacy that must be resolved for the sake of Somalia and Somalis.

Privileging humanitarian access

International diplomats and donor groups that have invested years of money and work in the TFG are understandably committed to pushing the TFG to make good on the transition. The “roadmap” that details essential tasks for the TFG to accomplish this year is a useful, if somewhat wishful, tool to keep TFG leaders on task.

But it is the wrong time to privilege progress on the political transition. With 750,000 Somalis at immediate risk of famine—over 200,000 have crowded into TFG-controlled areas of Mogadishu—the TFG’s energies must be redirected toward ensuring that famine relief reaches those in need. The humanitarian imperative must temporarily be elevated over other agendas, not as a “band-aid” but as a matter of getting fundamental priorities right. The state is a means to an end, not an end in itself—the ultimate goal is a safe and secure environment for Somalis to live. Completing the political transition in Somalia will not be seen as much of an accomplishment if hundreds of thousands of Somalis die in the process. It will serve as a catastrophic example of the saying “the operation was a success; the patient died.”

The international community must pursue state-building in Somalia as if people mattered.

What would this temporary refocusing of TFG priorities look like in practice?

International benchmarks by which the TFG is judged would need to be shifted away from the timetables and tasks of the transition roadmap toward measurable progress in

the delivery of food and other emergency assistance to famine victims. TFG security forces must be compelled to stop stealing food aid. TFG politicians must be compelled to stop using famine victims as bait to attract and divert aid. And all other predatory behavior by the TFG must be put to an immediate halt.³ Multiple systems of monitoring and reporting on aid delivery must be put in place, including Somali-led efforts to report on abuses and hold their own leaders accountable. Somalis and external actors must essentially shrink the space within which predatory groups and individuals feel they can divert food aid with impunity.

Above all, pressure on political leaders in the TFG must be unremitting. TFG authorities should be made to feel that every waking hour of their day must be devoted to getting TFG security forces under control. Islamic states now engaging in Somalia must not allow the TFG to leverage them as a means of neutralizing pressure from the West—the world must speak to the TFG shoulder to shoulder. All of the main actors in Mogadishu must be made to understand that when the famine is over, those found guilty of diverting food aid from famine victims will be pursued by every legal means available.

Honing and building international leverage

What kind of leverage does the outside world actually have on Somali actors in the TFG? Without leverage, external demands on the TFG for access and accountability will be little more than symbolic gestures, and the Somali people need effective action, not empty gestures.

Leverage has consistently been the weak link in international diplomacy with the TFG for a profoundly simple reason: The international community needs the TFG to succeed more than the TFG leadership does itself. For the international community, a functional and accountable Somali state is an essential precondition for development, counterterrorism, peace, and rule of law. International donors and diplomats feel they have invested too much in the TFG to decertify it. Leaders in the TFG, however, view the enterprise as a highly lucrative short-term windfall; they can walk away from the wreckage with millions of dollars in assets. In their periodic staring contests, the donors, not the TFG officials, always blink first.

What this has meant in practice is that the international community cannot credibly threaten action against the TFG as an institution—say, by threatening to suspend aid to it—unless external donors are willing to jettison the entire transitional government as an unsalvageable failure. To date, that is not an option external donors are willing to consider.

Leverage, then, must focus on punitive action against individual leaders who either are complicit in food aid diversion or who demonstrate no commitment to stopping it. In cases where TFG leaders are citizens of other countries, they can be held to account by

the laws of their adopted country; tax laws alone can prove to be very useful points of pressure on individuals accruing illicit funds. Freezing of personal assets, travel restrictions, and other measures can and should be assembled as credible threats to officials found culpable in the blockage of food aid to famine victims. The very act by donor states of exploring and creating a range of punitive actions against officials found guilty of blocking or diverting aid would have a chilling effect in TFG circles.

Keeping expectations realistic

Importantly, none of this requires that the TFG take direct responsibility for famine relief in Mogadishu. All that is required is for the TFG leadership to gain enough control over its own officials and security forces so that it is no longer the main impediment to food and medical assistance. That is not setting the bar too high.

For the state-builders, this need not constitute a derailing of the transitional roadmap—only a temporary delay. It should be entirely possible to redirect the TFG's priorities without doing grave damage to the political transition. Committees can continue to move forward on the draft constitution and other transitional tasks while the leadership devotes most of its energies to improving humanitarian access.

Given the bizarre and extremist behavior of Shabaab, it is not clear that the West and the United Nations can realistically do much to help the 500,000 famine victims trapped in territory under its control. As Enough has argued elsewhere, the best we can hope for on that score is sustained pressure and criticism on Shabaab from the Islamic world, which might have an outside shot at either changing the group's policies or emboldening some in Shabaab to defect or oust the extremists driving the group's handling of the famine. The current military offensive by AMISOM and the government of Kenya against Shabaab could also create some new humanitarian space, but even if successful it will be a highly insecure and difficult operating environment for aid agencies. At some point, Shabaab, like corrupt TFG officials, may have to answer to charges of crimes against humanity, as Matt Bryden argued in a recent Enough piece.⁴

But there is no excuse for famine-related deaths to occur in areas that the TFG controls. The TFG is funded, salaried, and physically protected by Western donors and African Union peacekeepers. Half of the Somali leadership holds citizenship in Western countries. The international community—with the United States taking a coordinating role and Islamic countries publicly leading—has leverage to compel the TFG to do the right thing, if we choose to use it. The 200,000 Somali famine victims in TFG controlled areas are counting on it.

Endnotes

- 1 Counterterrorism is, of course, the biggest external priority, at least for the United States and its allies. But the TFG actually plays only a modest role as a partner in counterterrorism and comes under little external pressure on this score because so little is expected of it. Counterterrorism initiatives by the United States and regional states rely more on third-party groups in Somalia, whose affiliation with the TFG is either nominal or nonexistent. This will be the topic of a future Enough briefing paper.
- 2 Ahmedou Ould-Abdulla, "Why the World Should Not Let Somalia Go to the Dogs," *Kenyan Daily Nation*, June 25, 2009, available at <http://www.nation.co.ke/oped/Opinion/-/440808/615326/-/4lc84a/-/index.html>.
- 3 For details on allegations of food aid diversion, see U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea, "[Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia submitted in accordance with resolution 1853 \(2008\)](#)" (March 2010) and "[Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 1916 \(2010\)](#)" (July 2011), available at <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/751/mongroup.shtml>.

See also Katharine Houreld, "Somalia famine aid stolen, UN investigating," Associated Press, August 15, 2011, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/ap-somalia-famine-aid-stolen-un-investigating-143004341.html>.
- 4 Matt Bryden, "Somalia's Famine is Not Just a Catastrophe, It's a Crime" (Enough Project, October 3, 2011), available at <http://www.enoughproject.org/publications/somalia-s-famine-not-just-catastrophe-it-s-crime>.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

