

Feature Story / Drought and Famine in East Africa /

Anatomy of a Famine

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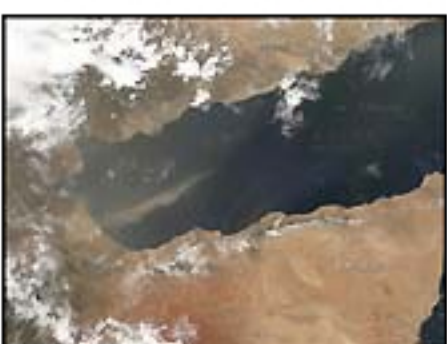
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Indian economist Amartya Sen did much of the work that won him a Nobel Prize in economics in 1998 on the mechanisms of poverty and causes of food shortages. He famously noted that while droughts are natural phenomena, famines are largely manmade. The current famine crisis in [Somalia](#) seems to bear out Sen's observation; along with horrific images of the famine's human toll, there has been much commentary carried by news media detailing the human failings that have contributed heavily to the misery. Wracked by more than 20 years of civil war and disastrous foreign interventions, Somalia has a fragile and very weak government incapable of either delivering relief itself or providing security for international agencies wishing to do so.



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Those relief agencies have been criticized for responding too slowly to a crisis many could see coming, but nearly all of those groups had been evicted from southern Somalia by the Islamist al-Shabab organization in 2009—after some relief workers had been killed in the region. Al-Shabab's ties to the terrorist organization al Qaeda prompted the U.S. government to prohibit U.S.-based agencies from operating in Somalia on evidence that al-Shabab had been exacting fees from relief agencies. The U.S. government in August 2011 relaxed those prohibitions to help ease the famine crisis.



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Even the drought that has triggered the crisis in the Horn of Africa may have partly a human cause, to the extent that [climate change](#) is a manmade phenomenon, as scientists overwhelmingly believe. It is certainly verifiable that global temperatures are rising, and several climate scientists who have been studying recurring droughts in East Africa for more than a decade say their research shows a direct link between rising ocean temperatures in the Indian Ocean and western [Pacific Ocean](#) and drought in the Horn of Africa, as high-pressure areas created by ocean warming alter the paths of rain-bringing winds. Ironically this effect is heightened by the occasional cooling in the eastern Pacific called La Niña that came up again in late 2010 and early 2011.

Farmers and herders in the Horn of Africa rely on two rainy seasons, in the spring and fall, and both were severely diminished in the fall of 2010 and the spring of 2011, essentially causing back-to-back droughts (the next rainy season is expected to start in October 2011). Droughts that used to occur about every decade in the Horn of Africa now occur every couple of years and are getting worse, both farmers and many climate scientists say. One climate scientist who has studied the area extensively, Chris Funk at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says his research team predicts that droughts in East Africa will continue to get even more intense and frequent.

The current East African drought, called the worst in 60 years by the [United Nations](#) (UN), has also caused food shortages in [Ethiopia](#), [Kenya](#), and [Djibouti](#). That the suffering in those countries has not reached famine proportions as defined by the UN may be attributed to relief programs operating in those countries, those operated by governments and by international relief agencies, which those governments welcome and with which they cooperate. In Ethiopia, these include ongoing programs designed to help farmers and cattle herders make the most of arid lands in eastern Ethiopia, and also programs offering resettlement to wetter areas of the country to alleviate [overpopulation](#) in the arid areas.



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Ethiopia in particular is sensitive to avoiding another declared famine: in 1984–1985, a severe famine caused by a drought and exacerbated by civil war and disastrous agricultural policies resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1 million people, and triggered massive populist relief efforts in the West, highlighted by the [Live Aid](#) rock concerts and recordings. Live Aid raised millions of dollars and is credited with saving the lives of thousands, but it also helped make Ethiopia nearly synonymous with famine to many in the West, a status the government would like to leave behind. In the wake of that famine, USAID, the U.S. government's relief agency, set up the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net) to monitor areas vulnerable to famine conditions; FEWS Net began predicting a famine in southern Somalia in late 2010.



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[Geography](#) has certainly played a role in the region's difficulties. The Horn of Africa is unusually arid for a tropical zone, particularly in its southern regions, partly because most of its weather comes from the west due to the direction of jet streams. Thus, Atlantic Ocean moisture that creates verdant [rain forests](#) across corresponding latitudes in western and central Africa are largely spent or diverted before reaching the horn. Geography also plays a part in the background of conflict in the region, particularly Somalia. A peninsula jutting out of easternmost Africa where the Gulf of Aden meets the Indian Ocean, the Horn of Africa provided a strategic setting for [European](#) powers colonizing the continent in the late 19th century, after the opening of the [Suez Canal](#) in 1869 facilitated shipping between Europe and [India](#). The area dominated by the [Somali](#) ethnic group wraps around the horn, and once formed parts of British, [French](#), and Italian colonies, which divided the Somali people during the colonial period.

After 1960, a newly independent Somalia carved from the former British and Italian colonies began efforts to reunify with other Somali groups in Kenya, in French Somaliland (which gained independence as Djibouti in 1977), and in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Efforts to wrest control of the Ogaden ended up ensnaring Somalia in [Cold War](#) gamesmanship between the [Soviet Union](#) and the [United States](#), as both powers sought allegiances in this geographically strategic area. Somali dictator [Mohamed Siad Barre](#), who took power in 1969, carried further favor with the Soviet Union (which had been quick to establish relations with Somalia upon the latter's independence) by trading access to ports for help in building a strong military. However, once Siad Barre used that military to invade the Ogaden in 1977, initially with great success, the Soviets were forced to choose sides, as they also supported the Marxist Derg regime which had taken power in Ethiopia in 1974. The Soviets declined to provide further support to Somalia's military, prompting Siad Barre to expel Russian personnel. The tide of the war therefore reversed, and Somali troops were forced to withdraw.

The humiliating defeat dashed hopes for the reunification of Somali peoples, ironically triggering a fracturing of Somali unity within Somalia, as clan rivalries, which have always been present among Somalis, became more pronounced in efforts to overthrow Siad Barre in the wake of the military defeat. Clan-based guerrilla revolts prompted Siad Barre to increasingly rely on members of his own clan, the Marehan of the Darod, to hold onto power and attempt to exploit rivalries among clans opposed to his rule. In the 1980s, Siad Barre was able to play a Cold War card and secure aid from the United States in exchange for military access to ports and airfields to counter the Soviet presence in Ethiopia. However, as the \$800 million in U.S. aid and similar amounts from [Italy](#) became fuel for corruption at the expense of Somalia's people, the aid was suspended by the end of the decade.



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With Siad Barre's regime thus weakened, rival clans were able to bring about his ouster by 1991 and throw Somalia further into chaos. As militias fought each other for control of the country, famine conditions spread in southern Somalia. Eventually the United States and the United Nations both responded to calls for intervention to ease the crisis, but those efforts ended in disaster. Though U.S. famine relief efforts did initially meet with modest success in alleviating suffering, further UN-led operations to ease conflict in Somalia ended up becoming ensnared in clan rivalries. This led to the infamous "Black Hawk Down" incident on October 3, 1993, in which two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters were shot down and 18 U.S. troops killed in a botched effort to arrest allies of clan warlord Mohamed Aideed in Mogadishu. The incident prompted U.S. President [Bill Clinton](#) to order the withdrawal of U.S. personnel. The international [interventions in Somalia](#) of this period are explained in more detail in a reference entry related to the Examine section of this feature.

Clan rivalries continued to fracture Somalia, thwarting international efforts to broker the creation of a transitional central government until 2004. However, in 2006 an Islamist group, the [Union of Islamic Courts](#) (UIC), took control of southern Somalia and provided a measure of stability. But the group's fundamentalist [Islamic](#) nature prompted a U.S.-backed invasion by Ethiopia to defeat UIC control. In a further instance of the unintended consequences that have often resulted from interventions in Somalia, the defeat of the UIC did not strengthen the transitional central government but instead paved the way for an even harder-line group of Islamists, al-Shabab, to take control in much of southern Somalia.

According to Amartya Sen, famines do not occur in countries where independent, democratic governments respond to the needs of their people. If there is a silver lining to the current situation in Somalia, it is that al-Shabab's hard line against Western aid has apparently caused a backlash from Somalis against the group, and some al-Shabab officials began cooperating. Perhaps the best hope for the long-suffering Somali people lies in their own demands for change.

Dennis Moran

Further Reading

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MLA Citation

"Drought and Famine in East Africa: Background." *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 16 May 2014.

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