

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Crisis in the Horn of Africa: Are we seeing the Normalisation of Food and Water Insecurity?

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Key Points

- Conflict, a lack of effective democratic governance, drought and rising food prices have contributed to the humanitarian crisis facing the Horn of Africa.
- There is potential for a crisis such as this to become more regular and even normalised as the factors mentioned previously all prevent the region from recovering from past instances of food and water insecurity.
- Said normalisation could be pushing the international community to contain Horn migration to Africa and reduce the reaction time of their aid efforts.
- Food and water insecurity could be normalised because of the region's inability to recover, which in turn is strengthened by the actions of an exhausted donor community and worsening climate conditions.

Summary

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network believes that roughly 70 million people will require food aid across 45 countries in 2017. There are four (Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen) that house 5,000,001-10,000,000 people that need emergency food assistance while also facing the added possibility of famine, which is the most severe form of food insecurity, this year. A lack of clean water, disease, incessant conflict, climactic changes, drought and rising food and water prices have contribute to a [“perfect” humanitarian crisis](#), made worse by an overly strained humanitarian community. In this paper, I argue that famines in the Horn of Africa could be normalised due to the constant conflict, an absence of good government and now worsening droughts, partly due to climate change, that has

prevented famine-prone countries from recovering from previous drought and severe food shortages that hit the region in 2010-11. The region may be experiencing a famine pattern: manmade factors with worsening climate elements produce famine-related crises that progressively increase in magnitude and rate. The normalisation of crisis could worsen as an exhausted international community becomes less inclined to intervene quickly in a perpetually crisis-ridden region, by containing displaced persons to Africa and easing the rate at which aid is provided.

Analysis

Regional Summation

Conflict

It has been argued that conflict is one of the root causes of famines in the Horn of Africa. One of the most obvious ways conflict causes famine is through the deliberate deprivation of food and forced starvation of the opposition. Military analysts call this “scorched earth tactics” employed by both formal armed services and militant groups, like Islamic State, usually in retreat, to deprive the advancing enemy of food, water, shelter or any resource that may assist in their war effort.

In South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen, conflict is contributing to food insecurity. It is difficult for aid agencies to operate in all three countries. In Somalia, al-Shabaab exacerbates hunger by blocking food aid from reaching starved areas. A previous famine, in 2011, was concentrated in southern Somalia, a region mainly controlled by al-Shabaab. The South Sudanese famine is a manmade disaster partly caused by the ethnic conflict that has been raging since 2013. In Yemen, the Saudi war against Houthi rebels, conducted with US support, has seen the bombing of food production sites through a scorched earth approach.

A Democratic Deficit

A study by Kirk Harris in [African Studies Quarterly](#) argues that the ‘protection of civil liberties is moderately associated with improved food security.’ [Evidence](#) suggests that most of the famines to have recently hit the Horn of Africa have partly been the result of an absence in functioning institutions that ensure politicians are held to account for their activities in mitigating food insecurity.

In South Sudan, press freedom is slowly being reduced. Police officers have been encouraged to beat and imprison journalists who report on Salva Kiir [gaining more power](#) and countless others have been murdered for reporting on police brutality and other material that does not flatter the regime.

Press freedom in [Yemen](#) has suffered some [setbacks](#) as the civil war and the presence of al Qaida make reporting freely a dangerous occupation. Though Kenya’s press freedom has been labelled “[partly free](#)”, the country’s press freedoms are [under threat](#) and Somalia’s journalists, most of whom are [free lancers](#), do not have access to security services or health care if they are injured on the job. All countries prone to famine in the region possess a

common trait: press freedoms are minimal and government abuses of power are difficult to report on.

Drought and Rising Food Prices

A La Niña event resulted in no rainfall during the first half of the 2016 October to December season resulting in poor crop yields and the worst vegetation conditions since the region last experienced famine in 2011. Rainfall in December 2016 to January 2017 declined sharply and the rainfall predicted for the March to May period is expected to result in below average levels of precipitation. A succession of poor crop harvests has resulted in increased food prices.

In Somalia, because of shrinking water supplies, livestock and access to staples like wheat, businesses have had little choice but to increase food prices to meet lower supply. [In 2016](#), October-December rainfall was below the average for that period and coupled with low river flow, the period's cereal production figures were estimated to be 70 per cent below the 1995-2015 average, and 75 per cent below the 2011-2015 average.

In Kenya, a national drought has been declared, with 23 of the 47 counties affected, drought has reduced the food supply. As in Somalia, the poor can ill afford to pay for food with their meagre savings. Money that would otherwise be spent on housing or school fees goes into what food they can afford. Earlier this year, the GEOGLAM Early Warning Crop Monitor classified the end of cropping seasons in Kenya, along with eastern Ethiopia and southern Somalia, as [failures](#).

In South Sudan, the first half of 2015 saw the prices of basic food commodities increase leading to a 30 per cent rise in the minimum amount of food bought to fulfil average dietary needs. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation people in South Sudan, during the same year, were spending up to 85 per cent of their income on food. Residents in urban areas have been hardest hit as they struggle to pay for food with what meagre savings they have left.

Long-term Regional Trends

Containing African Migration

Over the last two years, the European Union has made deals with other states to make it harder for migrants to enter Europe. In 2016, a 72 per cent decrease in illegal migrant detection by EU Member States came down to a three pronged plan to shut down the East Mediterranean route, the West Africa route and now the Central Mediterranean route to contain African migrants to Africa. The EU-Turkey agreement shut down the East Mediterranean route through Greece. Frontex, the EU border agency, succeeded in closing down the routes taken by refugees in West Africa. Lastly, a deal between the EU and the [Libyan Government](#) has been made to shut down the Central Mediterranean route.

What this has done, however, is force Horn migrants to [contain themselves](#) to famine-prone states that are not capable of effectively housing refugees in addition to their already at risk domestic population. South Sudan houses 1.9 million internally displaced people while

Somalia, Kenya and Yemen host 1.1 million, 500,000 and 111,000 refugees respectively. By shutting down the three main routes to Europe, the EU has forced migrants to either move [within the Horn of Africa itself](#), placing huge stress on a famine-prone region or to Middle Eastern countries like Yemen, [Oman](#) and the Gulf states, all of which are ill-equipped to cater to the food and water needs of others. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute's [Global Food Policy Report 2017](#), growing populations and food consumption is a massive future challenge for the Horn of Africa and neighbouring Middle East. Oman and Yemen already have a 50 per cent food import dependency whereas Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have a 70 per cent dependency. The containment of Africa's migrants to Africa without a plan to mitigate the stresses on rising populations has dangerous future implications. Restricting Africa's access to Europe will place greater stress on the Horn, leaving the region's food and water increasingly stressed.

Conflict, International Aid and Weary Donors

A possible reason for the [poor contribution](#) of aid by donor countries to the Horn could be that, after years of sending aid to Horn countries that show little evidence of change, the donor community is growing increasingly exhausted of displaying just good intentions instead of seeing some actual results in the mitigation of famine conditions in the region. The international aid community should be shifting more of their focus on the causes of food insecurity instead of constantly reacting to it.

Conflict has plagued the Horn of Africa for years, with all Horn countries under analysis being involved in a conflict in the last ten years and nearly half the African continent currently involved in a conflict or recovering from one. Interestingly, conflict in the Horn has not so much been about the old struggles like fighting tyranny or colonialists, but about [banditry](#) and the acquisition of as much money and material brought over by, for example, foreign aid workers as possible. Conflicts in the region are not just about theft, of course. It can be argued that the conflict in Yemen, for instance, is part of a geopolitical struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for greater influence in the Arab region. What is concerning, however, is that continual conflict, from South Sudan to Somalia, though perhaps rooted in genuine causes, risks becoming a permanent feature of the region. Conflicts risk losing their "original reasons" for more barbaric ones the longer conflict persists. Conflict has resulted in the exodus of aid agencies, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), from the region and, in the case of South Sudan, the rejection of 4,000 additional UN Peacekeepers in July 2016. Aid has contributed to poor government that does not encourage famine mitigation. A South Sudanese [diplomat](#), who did not want to be named, stated that the government does not bother investing domestic revenues in health and education because it knows the international community will always pay for it. This leaves the government to spend money on what keeps it in power: weapons. This is not to say they would not ordinarily spend money on weaponry, however, the supply of money from abroad makes the acquisition of weapons much easier.

Conflict has far reaching implications for aid deliverance in the Horn. Donor countries will always send aid, because it is politically difficult not to do so. Constant conflict, however, is starting to have a more obvious effect on the timing within which aid is delivered, rather

than the delivery of aid itself. It can be argued that donor countries are, unfortunately but understandably, growing sceptical of the efficacy of its aid donations and whether aid is actually mitigating the conditions for famine, or [contributing](#) to them. The feeling of being exploited and taken advantage of by the recipient countries could be being felt in donor countries, and the delayed responses by these countries even in the face of one of the worst humanitarian crises since 1945, could be a worrying harbinger for the exhausted donor community.

Climate Change and Drought

Changes to the Indian Ocean Dipole and El Niño weather events that exacerbated droughts in the Horn of Africa are long-term climatic trends that will have serious implications for the region. The Indian Ocean Dipole refers to the sea surface temperatures off the west coast of Indonesia cycling between cold and warm temperatures along the east coast of Africa. In the summer of 2016, the surface temperatures of the Indian Ocean were warmer than usual, leading to greater evaporation rates and more moisture in the air. As air with greater levels of moisture is cooler, this affected wind patterns. Wind is simply an equaliser of atmospheric pressure, temperature and density so, because of cooler air in the east of the Indian Ocean, wind patterns adapted and blew warmer air from eastern Africa. Farmers in the Horn rely on moist wind patterns to produce rainfall, but instead they got dry wind, resulting in rainfall failure. The Indian Ocean works via a cycle of positive (warmer) and negative (cooler) sea temperatures. Because the Indian Ocean suffered a negative dipole, there was less rainfall over the Horn. Due to climate change, this cycle could become more extreme in the future.

In 2015 and 2016, the El Niño weather event that struck the Horn of Africa exacerbated the droughts already affecting countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Kenya. The 2015-16 El Niño event was one of the strongest on record. Prior to the El Niño, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia were already enduring droughts that had lasted for at least two years. El Niño refers to the pushing of warm waters closer to the west coast of South America by trade winds. This results in cooler waters moving from the west of South America to the west Pacific. During 2015-16, El Niño was blamed for the drought that plagued the Horn of Africa, but led to extensive rainfall in southern Africa and even parts of Ethiopia and Kenya.

In the long-term, climate change is likely to have an impact on these natural climactic cycles. Some have argued that climate change [will not](#) have as big an impact on El Niño and La Niña events as some might think, but this conclusion is 'far from certain'. Climate changes will probably speed up the rate at which these events occur. El Niños are supposed to occur every three to five years but already the Australian Bureau of Meteorology has estimated that an El Niño has a 50 per cent chance of occurring this year. Furthermore, climate change will likely make rainfall increasingly spasmodic and hard to predict. In 2016 the "short rains", which fall in the Horn from July to December, were late and even failed in some places. Overall, climate change is making these weather events [more extreme](#). According to Robert Marchant, a Reader at the University of York's Institute for Tropical Ecosystems, warm-cooling shifts will be more extreme, making the harsh droughts seen at present the norm in the future.

Conclusion

This humanitarian crisis touching the Horn of Africa is being called the worst since World War Two. Based on recent trends, however, similar crises are likely to recur with greater frequency and possibly worsen. Conflict seems to be a perpetual part of the region, effective democracy still seems a pipe dream and droughts, having occurred in Somalia in 2008; Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia in 2009; Somalia in 2011; Ethiopia and Kenya in 2015; Somalia in 2016 and now, in 2017, across the Horn, seem to be an [annual occurrence](#).

The Horn of Africa is facing three possible famines at once because the issues listed above have all prevented the region from firstly, recovering from the previous crisis to hit in 2010-11, and secondly, safeguarding at-risk societies from ever experiencing them again. Perpetual crisis could, in the long term, worsen as the international community, exhausted by the Horn's consistent hosting of famine, chooses to reduce the urgency in which it responds to the region's woes. This is already being seen in the EU's containment of Horn migration and a dismal response to the UN's call for aid and donations. The Horn will continue to be a recipient of aid for the foreseeable future, but a trend analysts must observe is how quickly the international community chooses to respond to future famines, or the threat of them. The regularisation of famine could seriously damage the international community's faith in a famine-resistant Horn, leading to a donor community less inclined to act quickly to a crisis that has every chance of happening again.

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