“A cat in her house has the teeth of a lion.”
—Somali proverb

Upcoming Event
10–12 January 2012
Competitive Influence Game—Violent Extremist Organizations, Radicalization, and Piracy on the Horn of Africa

Location
U.S. Army Africa
Vicenza, Italy

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Food, Famine, and Politics in East Africa

Michael J. Flaherty, Office of Naval Intelligence, Kennedy Irregular Warfare Center

Food is one of man’s oldest and most reliable asymmetric weapons. It can be used offensively or defensively, internally or externally. It can force an enemy into capitulation or allow a defender to withstand a prolonged siege. It can quell or inflame insurrection. Using this particular weapon is not without risk, however; it can undermine a regime just as easily as it can secure it.

Whether it is the wasting of fields during the Peloponnesian War, the Holodomor in Ukraine, or the Great Famine in Ireland, food has been used as a political tool throughout human history. In East Africa, climate and geography have made food security the most important political consideration for governance at any level. By extension, it is also the most potent means of control.

Fundamentally, famine is not the lack of food, but rather the lack of money to buy it. No affluent merchant in Mogadishu, Kismaayo, or Negele has died for lack of nourishment. When the pastoralist’s cattle die or the farmer’s crops wilt, he loses not only his food source but also his income. Having sold his meager possessions to buy scarce and more expensive food, he has no further coping mechanisms. He is forced to depend on others for his family’s well-being. Food then becomes an effective control mechanism.

Regular occurrences of drought in the Horn of Africa have established patterns of dependency that governing authorities take advantage of regularly. All regimes in East Africa are forced to cope with regular periods of drought, although reports indicate that this year’s drought is more severe than most. However, because of drought’s cyclic nature, no local government is surprised by current conditions. The Famine Early Warning System (FEWS), a satellite imagery interpretation system that monitors rainfall and crop development, enables the United Nations (UN), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and local nations to predict conditions that lead to the risk of famine. In theory, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was also created specifically to manage the cyclical drought that affects the region, although it rarely performs this function. Responses to the indications provided by FEWS vary by locality, as does the relationship local governments have with NGOs.

Drought historically impacts ethnic Somali areas the hardest, both in Ethiopia and independent Somali-governed regions. Shifting political and clan boundaries, particularly during the civil war era, have greatly disrupted the pastoral society and heightened the effects of drought and made famine more likely. Additionally, constant conflict prevents the herder from normal migrations to graze and water the livestock on which his livelihood depends. This creates increased reliance on government benevolence during periods of water scarcity.

Overall, Kenya suffers least from the effects of drought in the region. Food scarcity impacts primarily the Somali-populated Northern Frontier District. Other areas of the country produce enough foodstuffs to adequately sustain populations in the north and east along the Somali border. The country also possesses the capacity to sustain the current Somali refugee population and additional refugees as needed. Whether the Kenyan government chooses to provide this aid is a different question. More often than not it does, after extracting financial concessions from the international community. To be clear, the sizeable refugee population does pose a genuine security concern for Nairobi given the ongoing civil war next door. The slow transition of temporary camps, such as Dadaab, into permanent settlements is also of concern to Kenya. However, the displaced Somalis are generally treated as a bargaining chip vice a humanitarian concern.

Ethiopia has proven quite adept at manipulating famine within its borders over successive regimes. From Selassie to Meles, the response to internal drought has been the same: ignore it, attempt to cover it up, and restrict access for relief agencies. As drought is common in minority Oromo and Somali regions, restricting access to aid is an effective tool for combating insurgency. A rebel force that does not eat does not fight. Once word of the famine got out in 1984, Mengitsu took the opportunity to transfer the population of the rebel area to the south and onto collective farms before aid agencies gained access. Not only did he use the famine to weaken an internal revolt, but his Marxist regime also gained a measure of international legitimacy from it.

Such is the norm in Africa. Western nations and their NGOs (including UN organizations) rarely resist the urge to intervene, even if such an effort extends conflict indefinitely. Endemic corruption at most levels of governance provides incentive to allow external actors to flood in, even in areas hit by civil war. The unfortunate side effect is that combatants are strengthened as well, through both the monetization and diversion of aid. It is a simple fact that men with guns eat before those without guns.

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Regardless of ideology, the use of food as an internal weapon is not without risk. A regime that is unable to provide for the basic needs of its people is inherently unstable. At the same time, a government that can shepherd its people through crisis is greatly strengthened. This is the opportunity and risk to both Al Shabaab and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in southern Somalia now, as drought has evolved into famine. The faction that manages humanitarian concerns more effectively will gain additional legitimacy from both local clans and the international community.

Initial responses have been mixed. Al Shabaab reversed some aid restrictions but maintained others. On the other side, TFG “soldiers” were responsible for looting a UN aid convoy in early August 2011 (although this key fact was largely unreported by Western news agencies). Several camp residents were killed by TFG militia in African Union Mission in Somalia-held territory. The end result is a propaganda victory for Al Shabaab forces, even as they evacuate Mogadishu. The State Department has also lifted restrictions for aid organizations cooperating with the Islamic faction, providing some measure of increased international legitimacy.

Although it is too early to tell which faction will manage the humanitarian concerns of Western aid agencies more effectively this year, the side that does will gain a tangible advantage in the ongoing civil war. Such concerns are often irrelevant locally, but do offer significant political opportunity if managed correctly.

Michael J. Flaherty has been the senior Horn of Africa analyst for the Office of Naval Intelligence’s Kennedy Irregular Warfare Center for the past 3 years. The Kennedy Irregular Warfare Center provides expeditionary intelligence support to national, naval special warfare, and navy expeditionary combat command forces worldwide.

“Even the brave are scared by a lion three times: first by its tracks, again by its roar, and one last time face to face.”

—Somali proverb
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