

U.N. Says Somalia Famine Has Ended, but Warns That Crisis Isn't Over
By Jeffrey Gettleman, The New York Times
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GENEVA, Sudan — The United Nations said on Friday that the famine that has killed tens of thousands of people in Somalia this past year has ended, thanks to a bumper harvest and a surge in emergency food deliveries.

But conditions are still precarious, United Nations officials warned, with many Somalis dying of hunger and more than two million still needing emergency rations to survive.

“The crisis is not over,” said José Graziano da Silva, director general of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, who just returned from Somalia.

Somalia has lurched from disaster to disaster in the past 21 years, since the central government basically collapsed. Year after year it is ranked as one of the poorest, most violent countries, plagued by warring militias, bandits, warlords and pirates.

Last year, a punishing drought killed livestock and turned once-fertile farms into fields of dust. Malnutrition and death rates soared, and hundreds of thousands of impoverished Somalis embarked on desperate treks across the desert, seeking help. Some starving mothers arrived at refugee camps in Kenya with dead children strapped to their backs. The few working hospitals in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, were soon so besieged with dying people that they resembled morgues.

The United Nations is careful about using the word famine, and in the past 20 years, only a few humanitarian emergencies have qualified, including in Sudan in 1998, Ethiopia in 2001 and Niger in 2005.

But in July, the United Nations declared a famine in Somalia, based on malnutrition and death rates, and said that the country was suffering its worst drought in more than 60 years. By early fall, the United Nations calculated that tens of thousands of people, mostly children, had starved to death or succumbed to malnutrition-related illnesses like measles.

The Shabab militant group made matters even worse. A vehemently anti-Western Islamist militia that controls large parts of southern Somalia, the Shabab banned most Western aid agencies from entering their territory and blocked starving villagers from fleeing famine zones. Shabab gunmen also warehoused sick people in their own refugee camps, which were visited by emissaries from Al Qaeda.

Still, aid agencies did not give up. The United Nations helped raise more than \$1 billion for relief efforts across the region, and aid workers increased deliveries to areas controlled by Somalia's weak transitional government and its allies. On top of that, heavy rains later in the fall replenished desiccated hinterlands, leading to a bountiful harvest. By November, famine conditions began to ease in some parts of the country.

Aid organizations are now focusing on recovery efforts, such as distributing seeds and digging irrigation canals.

“We can't avoid droughts, but we can put measures in place to try to prevent them from becoming a famine,” Mr. Graziano da Silva said.

Heavy fighting, though, continues to roil much of the country. Thousands of Kenyan and Ethiopian soldiers recently poured into Somalia, ostensibly to fight the Shabab, though many

analysts fear the Kenyans and Ethiopians are simply trying to carve out buffer zones to serve their own commercial interests.

At the same time, African Union troops are battling the Shabab on Mogadishu's outskirts, and relentless shelling continues to kill civilians.

"The situation in Somalia is still in the throes of its worst humanitarian crisis in decades," said Senait Gebregziabher, the head of operations in Somalia for Oxfam, an international aid organization. "The gains made so far could be reversed if the conflict worsens."

"The world shouldn't turn its back on Somalia," she added, "solely because statistics say there is no longer a famine."

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