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ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

WAITING FOR RATIONS Women in a refugee camp near Mogadishu, Somalia, wait to receive meals cooked and distributed by aid organizations, including the World Food Program.

Somalia's Agony Tests Limits of Aid

by Jeffrey Gettleman

BENADIR HOSPITAL is a chunky block of a building in downtown Mogadishu, built in the 1970s by the Chinese. It has cracked windows, ceiling fans that don't turn and long, ghostly hallways that stink of human excrement and diesel fuel — all that the nurses have to wash the floors. Each morning, legions of starving people trudge in, the victims of Somalia's spreading famine. Many have journeyed from hundreds of miles away. They spent every last dollar and every last calorie to make it here, and when they arrive, they simply collapse on the floor. Benadir's few doctors and nurses are all volunteers and all exhausted, and many wear tattered, bloodied smocks. The minute I walked in, I had a bad feeling I would find what I was looking for.

As the East Africa correspondent for The New York Times, my assignment has been to chronicle the current famine in Somalia, one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the last two decades, hitting one of the most forlorn and troubled countries

in modern times. My job is to seek out the suffering and write about it and to analyze the causes and especially the response, which has been woefully inadequate by all accounts, though not totally hopeless.

In Benadir, there is a room full of old blue cots, one after another, where the sickest children lie. On each bed, a little life is passing away. Some children cry, but most are quiet. The skin on their feet and hands is peeling off. All their bones show, like skeletons covered in parchment. I was standing just a few feet away from Kufow Ali Abdi, a destitute nomad, as he looked down on his dying daughter, and when the time came, there was no mystery, no fuss.

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I watched Mr. Kufow carefully unhook the I.V. that was attached to her shriveled body and then wrap her up in blue cloth. Her name was Kadija and she was 3 years old and probably not more than 20 pounds. Mr. Kufow walked out of the room, lightly carrying Kadija's body in his arms.

At least five children died that day in Benadir. At a camp not far away, where people are housed in twig huts and stare listlessly at the road, hoping for an aid truck to arrive, I was told that 10 had died. Across Somalia, it's hundreds a day.

Much of Africa, Somalia in particular, has had a tough time since independence in the 1960s, becoming synonymous with staggering levels of misery and leading many people to simply shrug and mutter "here we go again" when they hear of a new drought or a new war. But this current crisis in Somalia is on a different order of magnitude than the typical calamity, if there is such a thing. Tens of thousands of people have already died, and as many as 750,000 could soon starve to death, the United Nations says, the equivalent of the entire populations of Miami and Pittsburgh.

One reason the situation has gotten this grim is that most of the big Western aid agencies and charities, the ones with the technical expertise and so-called surge capacity to rapidly distribute aid, have been blocked from working in the famine zones. At a time when Somalia is suffering from the worst drought in 60 years, a ruthless militant group called the Shabab, which is essentially a Qaeda franchise, is on such an anti-Western tirade that it has banned Western music, Western dress, soccer, bras and even Western food aid. The Shabab are a heavily armed complication that differentiates this crisis from previous famines in Somalia, Ethiopia or Sudan and from other recent natural disasters like the tsunami in Indonesia or Haiti's earthquake, where aid groups were able to rush in and start saving lives within a matter of hours.

That said, it is not as if American or European aid agencies are simply giving up on Somalia. It's the opposite. They're stepping up operations and scrambling to find ways to get around the Shabab restrictions, turning to new technologies like sending electronic money by cellphone so people in famine zones can buy food themselves from local markets.

Western charities are also teaming up with the new players on the aid scene, like Turkish groups and other Muslim organizations that are allowed into Shabab areas. It all calls for more hustle and definitely more imagination: in Somalia there are a million impediments to the aid business — the Shabab, the broken-down state, dilapidated ports and airports, American government sanctions, a legacy of corruption and the sheer dangers of working in full-fledged anarchy haunted by militias, warlords, glassy-eyed gunmen and even 21st-century pirates. But charity groups say they are beginning to turn this famine around. They just need more resources and more time.

"One thing is clear," said Elhadj AsSy, a Unicef official. "With continued support from our donors and partners, our combined efforts to save lives, livelihoods and ways of life will make a difference."

But support — meaning dollars — has been frustratingly scant. While many more lives are at stake in Somalia's crisis, other recent disasters pulled in far more money. For instance, Save the Children U.S. has raised a little more than $5 million in private donations for the Horn of Africa crisis, which includes Somalia and the drought-inflicted areas of Kenya and Ethiopia. That contrasts with what Save the Children raised in 2004 for the Indonesian tsunami ($55.4 million) or the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 ($28.2 million) or even the earthquake in Japan earlier this year ($22.8 million) — and Japan is a rich country.

"Americans are incredibly generous when they understand that children are in desperate need," said Carolyn Miles, president of Save the Children. "If they knew millions of children were facing death in East Africa, I believe they would give. But I don't think Americans understand the scale of this disaster."

Rachel Wolff, a spokeswoman for World Vision, explained that "rapid-onset disasters," like a sudden earthquake, tend to get more attention and more donations. And Somalia's crisis was hardly rapid. This was a catastrophe 20 years in the making.

The central government collapsed in 1991, pulled down by clan warlords who then turned on one another and plunged Somalia into anarchy. The hospitals are now shot-up wrecks, the roads are abysmal and the airports and ports barely function, complicating the efforts to bring in life-saving supplies. Somalia's economy has been so shattered by war that there are few paying jobs, which leads to the pilfering of humanitarian aid, another serious problem here, because the black market of stolen food aid has blossomed into one of the country's few moneymaking industries, along with, of course, piracy.

Farms are ruined and much of the food Somalis survive on is imported, leaving them highly vulnerable to swings in global food prices, which are near record highs. Somalia is also probably one of the most violent countries on the planet. Whenever I come, I have to hire my own private mini-army to guard me, usually 10 to 15 gunmen, who start shadowing me the minute I step off the plane. Many aid workers have been killed or kidnapped in Somalia, which has scared aid organizations away.

"We are beyond frustrated to not be able to reach children who are dying, not be able to fulfill our humanitarian mandate within the worst-hit areas of the Horn drought crisis," said Mrs. Wolff of World Vision, which the Shabab has banned. "Since February, when we warned of the drought crisis, we have been exploring various options but do not have a breakthrough solution at this point."

The anti-Western Shabab have even banned immunizations.

In the other crises I've covered, there's a certain routine: check in with the United Nations upon arrival, get a security briefing, take an aid worker out for a drink and then, come next morning, hitch a ride to the field in an aid agency Land Cruiser with the name stenciled on the side.

In refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan or the many besieged Congolese towns I've worked in, it's hard not to stumble across other Westerners, many wearing mesh vests emblazoned with the name of their organization or the acronyms — Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, Unicef, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Rescue Committee, War Child — overseeing food deliveries, taking surveys or slipping a feeding tube up the nose of a starving child. But in Somalia, these big agencies are virtually absent.

The day a photographer and I visited the Badbaado camp in Mogadishu, many people thought we were the aid workers. We passed rows of tiny huts built literally out of sticks and rags, stepping over piles of human waste because these camps of starving people have sprouted up so fast there are few latrines, water taps or any real planning, and we met one emaciated person after another. They stumbled forward, sometimes hugging me for support or pulling the tight skin at their throats to show they were starving. One man reached out and jerked my arm.

"Look!" he said, pointing to a small bundle in the corner of his tent. I peered in. It was the corpse of his 2-year-old son, Suleiman, who had just died.

I heard many bad stories about the Shabab in these camps. Most people here fled Shabab zones, often starting out their journey with five or six children and arriving in Mogadishu with just one or two left. There is nothing else they can do. They either buried their children along the way or left them dying under a tree.

People told me the Shabab were trying to prevent anyone from leaving and that Shabab fighters had even set up special camps where thousands of exhausted, hungry and sick people were corralled at gunpoint, an ideal breeding ground for disease, especially because the Shabab have also banned immunizations. It's the perfect storm to kill countless children. Measles, typhoid and cholera are already beginning to sweep through the camps. Epidemiologists predict that the fatalities will shoot up and thousands of people will perish when the heavy rains come in November and December, spreading waterborne diseases.

Ken Menkhaus, a political science professor at Davidson College who has been working as a consultant on Somalia since the early 1990s, said the Shabab had pushed Somalia to a tipping point.

"The worst-case scenario is a Khmer Rouge situation where a group with a twisted ideology presides over the mass death of its own people," he said. "The numbers are going to be horrifying."

There have been some rumblings by Ethiopia and others of strengthening the current African Union peace-keeping force in Somalia and trying to blast out the Shabab so more aid can reach starving people. But the United States and the other nations with the necessary resources don't want to get dragged back into Somalia, which was the scene of a botched peace-keeping mission in the 1990s.

But this famine isn't all about the Shabab. Even in the few government-controlled zones, people are suffering on a shocking scale. Western donors, including the United States, have poured millions of dollars into Somalia's Transitional Federal Government, a divided, unpopular collection of politicians and former warlords based in Mogadishu, Somalia's bullet-riddled capital. American officials have branded the T.F.G., as it is known, as the best bulwark against the Shabab. But many analysts say the T.F.G. has performed dismally in responding to the famine (and to the Shabab), and in recent weeks, government militias have looted food and shot starving people.

The government's weaknesses have spawned the advent of more than 20 independent mini-states seeking to rule themselves. Most of these are formed by members of the same clan — the building block of Somali society — and are loose organizations of a few politicians and some gunmen. In a time of famine, it's a bit overwhelming for aid groups to deal with all these new entities.

In August, I flew with World Vision to visit Dolo, a small town on the Ethiopia-Somalia border controlled by a local militia. We took off from Nairobi at dawn, cruising over vast tracts of uninhabited, desiccated scrub brush, and landed on a dirt airstrip three hours later. Stick-thin militiamen dressed in camouflage uniforms that hung loose off their bony shoulders squinted at us as we stepped off the plane. We climbed into dusty trucks and sped off to see the district commissioner, Dolo's boss.

The district commissioner's office was a twig hut with a plastic tarp for a roof and sand for a floor. I think the man could read, but that was about it — he told us he had barely gone to school, didn't have any money and was struggling to handle the ceaseless flood of starving people pouring into his area. Just a few steps from his office I met a woman sitting on an empty wooden box along the road, with four very thin children. They had just arrived from a Shabab area, and the woman said that what little food was being distributed through the International Committee of the Red Cross was getting stolen by Shabab fighters.

"They're starving, too," she said.

The World Vision team made a quick survey of conditions in the town, leaving Chris Smoot, the Somalia country director, almost in tears.

"I see a community that doesn't know how to cope," Mr. Smoot said. "They're cut off, this little island of whatever."

We landed back in Nairobi by nightfall, proof of another problem: few foreign aid workers who work on Somalia actually spend much time in Somalia. Just about all the embassies and aid agencies run their Somali operations by remote control from Nairobi, relying on local staffs and updates by phone and e-mail, because it's too dangerous for foreigners to linger in Somalia for more than a few hours (unless you're a journalist with your own mini-army). One of the consequences of this arm's-length approach is an inevitable lack of oversight, which has precipitated scandals like accusations against the World Food Program that as much as half of the emergency food intended for needy people in Somalia is being stolen by corrupt United Nations contractors and sold on the open market; some of the proceeds are said to be going to the Shabab, who then use the money for guns.

The accusations have never been definitively proved. But just their possibility prompted the American government to slap heavy restrictions on aid to Somalia, which remain in place now, even during the famine. American officials recently indicated that they had relaxed some of the restrictions, but aid agencies said it was still difficult to determine what was legal and what was not.

"The uncertainties around what we're allowed to do in southern Somalia, and with whom, create a chilling effect for aid groups who would otherwise want to respond," explained Jeremy Konyndyk, a director of policy and advocacy for Mercy Corps.

All this might easily lead one to conclude that Somalia is beyond hope and that hundreds of thousands of people are going to die, no matter what. But that's not true. Aid agencies are making progress, though the situation is far from ideal. I constantly get e-mails asking: what can I do to help?

I try not to pick favorites, and I give the best picture I can, which is constantly changing, of who is doing what in response to this famine. The Shabab are mercurial, letting in some big aid groups but not others. Unicef, for example, is one of the few United Nations agencies able to do some work in Shabab areas, supporting feeding centers and medical clinics, but all through Somali staff. The World Food Program is distributing food in the Mogadishu camps, but once again there are myriad accusations of aid being stolen.

Smaller aid agencies definitely have more flexibility. For instance, the only Western aid worker I saw during a recent trip to Dhobley, a wild, militia-controlled town on the Somalia-Kenya border, was a burly Australian with a white Hemingway-esque beard who was working for the American Refugee Committee. It's a private aid agency that has sent several foreigners into Somalia to oversee sanitation and cash-for-work projects.

Kenya and Ethiopia host more than 600,000 Somali refugees, and many of the major aid organi-

zations, like CARE, Doctors Without Borders, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Save the Children, are running programs in camps in these two countries. Inside Somalia, many aid groups are embracing the approach of cash transfers by cellphone as a way to get around the Shabab and deliver aid directly — and discreetly — to poor people. It is early days yet, but it seems to be working.

Muslim charities, like Islamic Relief and several Turkish aid agencies, are playing an increasingly large role in this crisis, because the Shabab continue to allow them much more access to drought zones than the Western groups. Somali organizations, like Saacid, are also helping feed people, though the local charities are often undermanned and underfinanced.

It is important to remember that however plagued Somalia is, however routine conflict, drought and disease have become, however many Somalis have already needlessly died, Somalis are not somehow wired differently from the rest of us. They are not numb to suffering. They are not grief-proof. I'll never forget the expression on Mr. Kufow's face as he stumbled out of Benadir Hospital into the penetrating sunshine with his lifeless little girl in his arms. He may not have been weeping openly. But he looked as if he could barely breathe.

A SPECIAL SECTION

Giving

The New York Times

NY F1

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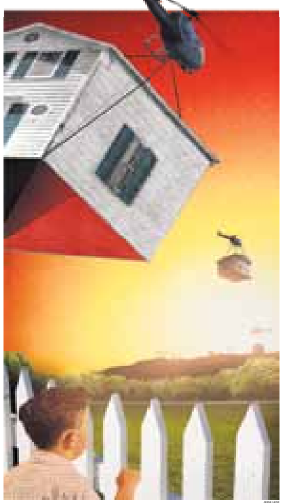
Continued on Page F2



JESSE LENZ

When Needs Hit Home

By STEPHANIE STROM

FOR 11 nights last month, several dozen homeless people slept on plastic sheeting and soiled blankets outside the gleaming new $500 million headquarters of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Seattle. Their objective was a $30,000 grant to help reopen shelters that had been closed by cuts in government funds.

The demonstration outside the foundation, the wealthiest in the world with $37 billion under its control, illustrated the gap between those who say charitable giving should be directed at individuals in need — a street-level approach, sometimes disdainfully called checkbook philanthropy — and those whose generosity runs toward big-ticket items like experimental programs, cutting-edge university science labs or what Doris Buffett, Warren E. Buffett's older sister, calls "S.O.B. gifts" — donations that support symphonies, opera and ballet.

As America's needs grow, philanthropy and how it is carried out are being questioned more closely.

Eventually, the government relented and reversed the cuts in Seattle, and the protest ended. Meanwhile, the Gates Foundation noted that it had spent $47 million on transitional housing and homeless families in the Pacific Northwest and had committed $67 million more to the issue.

"We're trying to move upstream to a systems level to either prevent family homelessness before it happens or to end it as soon as possible after it happens," said Melissa Milburn, a spokeswoman for the foundation.

As the ranks of the needy grow, so does the need for charities that put food on a poor family's table, a roof over a homeless man's head or a coat on the back of a child whose mother is in prison, or for the charities that provide dental work for a woman without health insurance.

The number of Americans living below the poverty line — 46.2 million — is the highest it has been since the Census Bureau began collecting such data. Median incomes are declining, and college graduates can't find jobs. The gap between the haves and have-nots has widened sharply.

Yet for the last three years, state and local governments have slashed budgets that address homelessness, school nutrition, substance abuse and a range of other social services. In some cases, money is cut outright; in others, governments defer payments for months. Still others

Continued on Page F6

ROLLING IN THE GROCERIES
Like many poor neighborhoods, the Germantown section of Quincy, Mass., has no supermarket, but it does have the Mobile Pantry.
By John Hanc, Page 4.

PEANUT BUTTER PLUS
Abbott Laboratories is helping Haitians build a self-sustaining enterprise making a nutrition supplement.
By Duff Wilson, Page 8.

BEN DEPP FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEST EGG
The task of managing Mark Zuckerberg's $100 million gift for Newark's troubled school system.
By Jodi Rudoren, Page 11.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOWS
The Mobile Pantry, the methods of Dr. Ignacio Ponseti, the making of Nourimanba and the publicists who help charities put on the Ritz.
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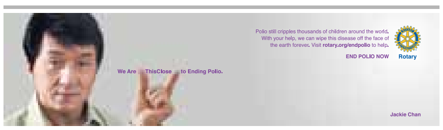

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WAITING FOR RATIONS Women in a refugee camp near Mogadishu, Somalia, wait to receive meals cooked and distributed by aid organizations, including the World Food Program.

Some Aid Trickles Into Somalia, Encircled by Death

From Page F1

the road, hoping for an aid truck to arrive, I was told that 10 had died. Across Somalia, it's hundreds a day.

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