

Humanitarian Aid Routinely Diverted

*By Abdurrahman Warsameh**

It's no secret that Somalia has led the Transparency International list as the most corrupt country in the world for four straight years.

The public perception of corruption in Somalia's public and private enterprises is universal, particularly when it comes to the victims of conflict and the way humanitarian aid is managed.

Direct humanitarian activities of almost all international aid agencies have either been banned by Somalia's Islamist groups or suspended by the agencies themselves since late 2009 and early 2010. However, some aid manages to trickle into the camps of almost 1.5 million displaced Mogadishu residents on the outskirts of the restive Somali capital and elsewhere in the war-torn country.

Most displaced civilians fled Mogadishu in 2007, after major conflict erupted between the Islamist insurgency and Somali government forces backed by Ethiopian troops, which later withdrew from the country in early 2009.

Aid Profiteering

The massive aid program launched by the international community to aid the needy has been diverted, as a report by the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Group confirmed.

Issued in early March 2010, the report focused on the UN's World Food Program (WFP), the largest single provider of food aid for internally displaced people (IDPs) on the outskirts of the Somali capital.

The report alleges that the distribution systems relied upon by the food agency were made up of corrupt local contractors, including middlemen, transporters and distributors who diverted the humanitarian aid for the needy to local markets in Mogadishu and elsewhere in Somalia.

"The system offers a variety of opportunities for diversion all along the supply chain," the report says. The diversion involves collusion between ground transporters and their partners and is a common form of fraud, especially where transporters and the partners are actually owned or controlled by the same people.

The supply chain starts when the aid is first brought to local seaports by WFP in chartered ships and is then offloaded to warehouses in Mogadishu and other towns along the coast. The

WFP then contracts local companies to transport aid from the warehouses to their partners for eventual distribution. While en route to IDP camps, aid is then — in part or as a whole — diverted for sale at markets by a coalition of transport contractors, local WFP partners and armed groups, who then share the proceeds in prearranged quotas.

“Percentages vary, but sources interviewed by the Monitoring Group describe an approximate division of 30 percent for the implementing partner and local WFP personnel, 10 percent for the ground transporter, and five to 10 percent for the armed group in control of the area. The remainder of the consignment is distributed to the displaced population,” according to the report.

Three local individuals and their family members or close associates — Abukar Omar Adaani, Abdulqadir Mohamed Nur “Enow,” and Mohamed Deylaaf — were implicated in the report as the sole WFP contractors for the transportation of the largest part of the agency’s aid deliveries.

“In 2009, these three individuals secured 80 percent of WFP delivery contracts as part of the WFP transportation budget of approximately \$200 million,” the UN report said. Despite the allegations, these individuals haven’t been formally investigated or legally accused by the WFP.

Although the WFP denied the charges, many IDPs in the camps that stretch along the corridor between Mogadishu and Afgooye, a small town 30 kilometers (about 18 miles) southwest of the capital, believe aid deliveries at the camps have always been dubious.

Making Ends Meet

Testimonies of affected IDPs indicate corruption in humanitarian aid is entrenched and widespread, adding to the suffering of victims of the conflict for the past two decades, and particularly for the past three years in the south central part of the country.

Faduma Isse, a single mother of eight, has lived in a makeshift, one-room shelter at the camp with her family for three years. She says since their ordeal began, aid deliveries to camps have never been consistent: “We don’t get enough of anything, from food handouts to tents, blankets and medicine, but we’ve seen it’s all taken to the markets and sold. It is very clear and evident everywhere.”

Aid meant for the camps is openly sold in markets around the very IDP camps it was supposed to benefit, as well as in the main Mogadishu markets, such as the Bakara Market.

Muse Yarow, another displaced resident and a father of four, says he was actually “pleased” the Islamists banned the aid agencies because he argues the aid was helping traders, rather than the poor displaced people.

“I am pleased they chased them away because they were saying they helped us, but they just helped themselves and their cronies. They sold the aid for the vulnerable and built palaces in Nairobi and Mogadishu,” he explained.

In many cases, knowing the aid actually delivered to them will be far less than what they need to survive, the displaced simply prefer to rush into the markets to try to buy what they can when they learn of aid deliveries to the camps.

“We wasted no time queuing or fighting over (a) small quantity of aid that would not suffice even a hundred families, let alone hundreds of thousands of hungry displaced people,” Muse Dahir, head of a local IDP cooperative, said.

He added that the displaced know that whenever there was talk of an aid delivery coming to the camps, it was the right time to head to the markets, where they had a better chance of getting food and other essentials “plenty and cheap,” as much of the aid had already been diverted by WFP partners to the markets.

At the main Mogadishu market, as well as other smaller markets around the coastal city, a web of traders, middlemen, contracted aid transporters and distributors just need to wait, certain they will profit from both the diverted humanitarian aid deliveries intended for the IDPs and the little money the IDPs have managed to earn in a broken economy.

Humanitarian Aid for Sale

Yasin Mohamed, a trader at the Mogadishu’s Bakara market, the biggest in Somalia, says the practice of aid diversion has been widespread and almost openly carried out. “Middlemen from the local aid distributors come to the market to make deals with the traders before trucks after trucks full of food aid come to warehouses in or outside the market for repackaging of the stuff, before it was sold to the public,” Mohamed said.

Mohamed added that repackaging was necessary to remove the sacks or cartons with the UN or WFP insignia imprinted on them and replace them with clear, non-marked containers that would hide the origin of the goods. However, many other items such as blankets and kitchen utensils that are clearly marked for humanitarian aid are often openly sold in the markets after they have been diverted from IDP camps.

Islamist groups, who control much of south and center of the war-ravaged horn-of-African nation, use extortion to take their share of 5 to 10 percent of the proceeds from the sale of the humanitarian aid, said the UN Monitoring Groups report. The armed groups are reported to threaten to ban the contractors' work in the areas in their control, unless they get their share both in cash and in-kind.

"It has always been the case with the armed group's relationship with corrupt contractors, because the groups provide protection while the local aid distributors bring in the funding," says transparency advocate Mohamed Elmi, who works as an independent researcher based in Mogadishu.

Business As Usual

Despite all this, the besieged Somali government, which has been fighting a deadly Islamist insurgency for years, has done nothing to fight the practice of food diversion, contends Elmi.

"Although the government was not directly involved in the fraud to divert humanitarian aid for the displaced Somalis, the government has come on the side of those implicated, arguing for their innocence," the transparency advocate said.

In September 2010, Somalia's president, Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, as reported by The New York Times, wrote a letter to Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, defending some of the accused as "very conscientious, diligent and hard-working" people, adding that if it were not for the contractors, "many Somalis would have perished."

Somali government forces provided the security for the aid convoys because most of the humanitarian assistance came through the main Mogadishu port, which is controlled by the government. "As the forces are poorly paid, they take some protection money from each and every truck they protect until they cross over to the rebels' side of the city, where all the displaced people's camps are located," said a former senior Somali security commander, who asked to remain anonymous.

WFP contractors and partners are responsible for the delivery of the aid to the camps, but protection is provided by government troops during the aid's transit to government-held areas and by armed Islamist groups after the aid crosses over to their territory, where most of IDP's camps are located.

Either way, diverted humanitarian food aid is openly sold in the government-controlled part of the capital and on the Islamist side. Both factions seem to be turning a blind eye to the practice when not directly colluding with the corrupt contractors.

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