

# The Washington Times

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Tuesday, September 30, 2008

## HOLMES: Food crisis in Africa

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### COMMENTARY:

Three years ago, in particular at the Gleneagles Summit, the world focused long-overdue attention on Africa. Pledges were made and promises trumpeted. Fast forward to 2008, when world leaders gathered at United Nations headquarters to assess progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals, the first of which is to "halve world poverty and hunger." How far have we come toward ending the pervasive indignity of hunger that haunts so much of sub-Saharan Africa?

A recent trip to Ethiopia was one way of measuring this. At least 16 million people (including 3 million children) across the Horn of Africa urgently require food and other humanitarian aid as a result of another crippling drought, exacerbated by the impact of soaring food and fuel prices, and in some places, continuing armed conflict.

In Ethiopia alone, 6.4 million currently require emergency food with no significant new harvest in sight in some areas until next spring. Thousands of children are being treated for severe acute malnutrition. An even worse crisis has been avoided because another 8 million Ethiopians were already receiving cash or food vouchers under an innovative government safety net program.

Many will sigh with resignation as they hit the mental rewind button to recall previous hunger crises in Africa. However, what is happening today in the Horn is fundamentally different from Ethiopia's epic, largely man-made famine of 1984.

Instead it allows us a glimpse of what much of our world might be like if we do not deal effectively with the huge challenges of rising food and fuel prices, climate change, environmental stress and population pressures. Great swathes of the developing world could be pushed to the margins of survival. And have no doubt, the fate of millions of hungry, impoverished citizens will most certainly affect our own, not least through further political instability.

Across the globe, the effects of sharply rising food prices are being felt. Rapid urbanization, spiraling population growth and changing consumption

patterns are driving much of this. In developing countries, basic food staples have become unaffordable to many. In some parts of Ethiopia, local food prices have shot up 500 percent since last year.

Worst affected are those hit by the triple whammy of drought, food prices out of range of their incomes, and the devastating effects of conflict. In Ogaden, the Somali region of Ethiopia, the failure of the main spring rains for the third successive year has left hundreds of thousands of people facing what they see as the worst drought since 1928. The conflict has already made it much harder for the largely pastoralist population to sell their animals and buy food. Much of the population is now simply unable to withstand further price shocks or crop failures. People, not least mothers and children, desperately need food and water. More than 1 million people now receive emergency food aid in Ogaden, but more help is needed, and needed now.

So what can we do, in Ethiopia in particular?

(1) In Ogaden as elsewhere, we need to know the crisis' full scale. The government and the humanitarian community need to work together in a transparent, impartial manner so together we can reach all those in need. The government can also help us speed delivery of aid, make sure it reaches those most in need, and ensure safe, unimpeded access for all humanitarian workers.

(2) We need to build on innovations such as the Government's Productive Safety Net Program to plug the holes and extend its ability not only to protect vulnerable people but also to improve their ability to graduate away from dependence on food assistance.

(3) We need a scaled-up response from donors as quickly as possible - for emergency food aid as well as for health, primary education, and water/sanitation efforts. The joint appeal launched in June for \$325 million for three months emergency help for 4.6 million has only been 62 percent funded, and now we need hundreds of millions of dollars more just to get through the next few months. Millions of highly vulnerable people desperately need help to make sure we avoid the dreadful scenes of the past.

But we must not stop there. Beyond food aid for today, we above all need to help people feed themselves tomorrow. We cannot stop the droughts - and climate change may make them worse - but we can reduce their impact and stop the cycle of crises where too much money has to go into emergency response. Investment in agriculture to developing countries is urgently needed to reverse the neglect of the last 30 years.

Small farmers and pastoralists - 80 percent of the population in Ethiopia - must be able to feed their families while building assets for the future. Well-targeted investments can make a life-changing difference. Better drought management techniques; crop adaptation; improved legal access to land; new water management approaches; provision of credit; better seeds and tools, drip irrigation and other technologies suited to sub-Saharan Africa's needs - these are the practical building blocks that can help end the scourge of hunger.

Africa, and Ethiopia, need a new Green Revolution - one that is agriculturally productive, economically profitable and environmentally sustainable. The time to do it is now, before the effects of rising population, more erratic weather, commodity price shocks and depleting fossil fuel resources cause further massive suffering for the world's poorest.

Ethiopia's government cannot do this alone. No government can, which is why the United Nations and humanitarian community will continue their assistance, both to tackle emergency needs and build sustainable livelihoods for the future. The food crisis in the Horn is not an isolated example or aberration - it is a canary in the coal mine for other developing nations. Lives are on the line as we fast forward to the future.

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