



# Wasting away in the shadows

*With the world's gaze fixed on the pirates operating off their country's coast, the suffering of millions of Somalis on land seems to go almost unnoticed*

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Just step into a feeding center here, and the sense of hopelessness is overwhelming.

Dozens of women sit with listless babies in their laps, snapping their fingers, trying to get a flicker of life out of their dying children.

Little eyes close. Wizened one-year-olds struggle to breathe. This is the place where help is supposed to be on its way. But the nurses in the filthy smocks are besieged. From the doorway, you can see the future of Somalia fading away.

While the audacity of a band of Somali pirates who hijacked a ship full of weapons has grabbed the world's attention, it is the slow-burn suffering of millions of Somalis that seems to go almost unnoticed.

The suffering is not new. Or especially surprising. This country on the edge of Africa has been slowly, but inexorably, sliding toward an abyss for the past year and a half — or some would argue, for the past 17.

UN officials have called Somalia “the forgotten crisis.”

The causes are unemployment, drought, inflation, a squeeze on global food supplies and a war that will not end. Fighting between Somalia's weak transitional government and a determined Islamist insurgency has been heating up in the past few weeks, driving thousands from their homes and cutting people off from food. The hospital wards here are one indicator of the conflict's intensity.

“In the past two months,” said Muhammad Hussein, a doctor at a feeding center in Afgooye, “our patients have doubled.”

In August, 200 women with emaciated babies lined up outside his clinic every day. Today, there are 400.

More than 3 million people, about half Somalia's population, need emergency rations to survive. Nobody seems to like it. Many say they feel humiliated.

“That's all we talk about: when will the next handout come,” said Zenab Ali Osman, a grandmother raising her daughter's children.

Before fighting drove her from Mogadishu, the capital, to Afgooye's endless refugee camps of gundrop-shaped huts made of plastic bags and in some cases soiled T-shirts, Zenab used to wash clothes for a living. On a good day, she made the equivalent of US\$0.80.

The civil war has eviscerated the economy, leaving so many people to survive on pennies. But out on the high seas, it is a different story. Pirates thrive off this same lawlessness, making millions of dollars by hijacking ships in Somalia's unpatrolled waters and demanding hefty ransoms to free them. On Sept. 25, a band of pirates seized a Ukrainian freighter full of tanks and other weapons bound for Kenya.

The pirates are asking for US\$20 million, an unfathomable amount here. Negotiations are still going on, and the likely price will probably be closer to US\$5 million. No one wants to pay the pirates, but in this case, with 20 crew members being held hostage on a ship full of explosives, giving in may be the safest way out.

But the pirates may be growing impatient. According to the Associated Press, they threat-

ened on Friday night to blow up the ship if they were not paid the money within three days.

“I pray to God they are caught,” said Dhuho Abdi Omar, a mother who was waiting at a feeding center in Afgooye with her two-year-old girl, who had not eaten for two weeks. “These pirates are blocking our food.”

Not everyone agreed. Many young men in the camps seemed to lionize the gunmen of the seas.

“They're tough guys,” said Muhammad Warsame, 22. “And they're protecting our coast.”

The pirates have made the same argument, saying they hijack ships in response to illegal fishing and dumping.

“They're our marines,” said Jaemali Argaga, a militia leader.

Somalia has not had any marines, or national army or navy of any significance, since the central government imploded in 1991. Clan-based warlords carved the country into fiefs, preying upon the population. People eventually got fed up, and in the summer of 2006, a grass-roots Islamist movement drove away the warlords.

Ethiopia and the US accused the Islamists of sheltering terrorists, and in the winter of 2006, Ethiopian and US forces ousted the Islamists. But the Islamists are back. Supported by businessmen and war profiteers, Islamist guerrilla fighters are viciously battling the weak government forces and Ethiopian soldiers. Civilians are often caught in between. Thousands have been killed in the past year and a half.

Many aid workers have fled. The UN World Food Program is one of the last organizations with a large staff inside Somalia. Denise Brown, the

deputy country director, said the environment was increasingly hostile. And desperate.

Thousands of hungry people besieged a convoy of 35 UN-chartered food trucks moving through Mogadishu two weeks ago. They stripped the trucks clean, looting more than 1 million kilograms of food.

“It's unprecedented,” Brown said “Things just went haywire.”

That has taken food out of the mouths of people like Zenab, whose daughter was one of the 20 street sweepers in Mogadishu killed by a bomb in August that was buried in a pile of garbage.

She is now helping raise several grandchildren. Amina, 13 months old, will not eat. The two sat the other day on a cot covered with flies. All around them were babies looking up at the ceiling with round wet eyes, some with faces covered in tape because they were too sick to swallow and were being fed milk through their noses.

Whom does she blame? “Those with guns,” Zenab said. “Whoever they are.”

**Below:** The crew of the Ukrainian freighter *MV Faina* stands on deck after a US Navy request to check on their welfare last month. On Wednesday, officials said the pirates who seized the merchant vessel off the Somali coast were near a deal that would exchange the ship, its cargo and crew for US\$5 million. **Top:** Mothers tried to feed their malnourished children inside a feeding center in Afgooye, Somalia on Thursday. **Inset:** A severely malnourished baby lays unresponsive at the Afgooye feeding center on Thursday. PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

