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Somalia: Want and waste



Thieves unload a truckload of refugee food. A third of the food that's loaded on trucks never gets to the camps. And half of the food that does get through is stolen in the camps.

Why food doesn't reach the refugees

Relief agencies look the other way as loads intended for camps are 'diverted'

By Richard Kent ramer
Knight News Service
Third of four parts

DIYERU BEYELER, 10, of the Horn of Africa, left her home grazing lands in the Ogaden a few months ago. Her mother had fled on and off in his area of Ethiopia, although that had been happening for years. The land was dry, and forage for his herd was scarce, although that too he had seen before.

And it was known that there was food here. At least, it was known all over the Ogaden that free food was distributed just across the border in Somalia.

He and his family, along with hundreds of neighbors in the Ogaden, ended up in Booco Camp, 30 miles inside Somalia, 20 miles from home.

Now, Ali stood in front of his low, shoddy hut. He was a very thin man of 40. He carried a herring staff in one hand, though his cane and staff were long since left behind. He was confused. He was calm. He had heard his youngest son, Ismail, 2, that morning.

"Because of hunger and pain with the measles," he explained. He did not get the food. He had four other children.

He discovered a solution, however. "No, they are not sick. They are hungry. Today, they ate a quarter of a pound that I borrowed. My name is written everywhere for aid, but the food is not enough by the end of the day."

He passed, trying to be precise with the next answer. He was tired, and when they returned there was in them something hard which had not been evident before.

"I can tell you exactly," he said. "The last food they gave us 14 days ago."

warehouse, from trucks and from the camps themselves — that starvation is a constant threat.

The head of the relief program, Otto Haggenbueche, delegate for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said he gets a lot of reports about "leakage."

"There were situations," he said, "where we got this leakage was between 30 and 50 percent."

"You want a figure?" By estimate, he asked during a stroll through the black market at Booco Camp. "Sixty percent is stolen. Sixty percent or two-thirds. A third of the food that's loaded on trucks never gets to the camps. That's from the records — what records there are, and half of the food that does get through is stolen in the camps."

Relief workers say the situation improved the fall when CARE, the American voluntary organization, introduced a new system for control of food distribution. "We know it's getting better," said one U.N. volunteer, "because now the army is coming around and asking us for food. The optimism among them put the diversion rate at 30 percent these days."

In Sept. 1, food distribution in the Horn district had improved dramatically, according to Marie-Etne, director of Medical Volunteers International, the Bay Area relief agency providing aid to Booco I and II.

The reason is that we now have an absolute expert, an Italian appointed by UNHCR, who has supervised food deliveries in India for 15 years, Kent says.

"We have had no food disappear, and the results are visible: General health in both camps has picked up considerably. Death from malnutrition has nearly disappeared."

The only problems are mechanical breakdowns. "On a normal truck it's half a day, but over here it's 10 days," he said.

UNCEF wheelbarrow is used to transport precious water supplies at Ali Matan refugee camp in Somalia

smoothed some political problems and diagnosed the government's non-performance on dual crises of agriculture and balance of trade.

Food for the refugees has spread into Djibouti and is shipped to Kenya, where it fetches good prices in a currency more desirable than Somali shillings.

Food for the refugees has created a new level of commerce at Somalia. Markets have sprung up in and around every refugee camp, serving buyers from the surrounding villages and husband, and often providing the last recourse for the refugees themselves.

Khadija Sidiq, 30, said of her 4-year-old daughter, who died the day before. "She died hungry. She was the youngest, and she could not eat hard food."

The U.S. corn is hard food. "I could not eat it either," said Khadija Sidiq. "Before, when they would give food, I was taking for the four children one-half kilo plus one cup. That is one-night only of food. The last food they gave was 20 days ago."

I go to the bush to take sticks for firewood. In one day, on the side of the sticks, I can buy 10 shillings and then in the market I can buy two kilos of the same corn. Then I make one-half kilo at midday, one-half kilo in evening, one-half kilo early next day, and one-half kilo at midday next day.

But Sidiq could not eat the corn. She got diarrhea. She vomited everything. She died after 10 days of sickness.

Plots of trucks are supposed to take the food from Mogadishu and Berbera ports to the camps along the border. But delivery is far from assured, reports sent to donor governments and to the United Nations describe what occurs. Food drops off almost every truck into private houses or markets on the way to the camps. The temptation is great, a driver who sells only 10 percent of his load can usually double his salary for the month. Border truckers have been known not to leave Mogadishu at all. They sell the food to a merchant who sells their tank full of diesel fuel to the black marketeers and return to the warehouse for another load.

If they get to the camp with a part of their load, the truckers have to cover the logistics men of the camp to register that a full load arrived. The logistics men, as the price of their services will take a few dozen bags.

Camp officials must be cut in. The little boys, who slide out the food to the logistics men, often take a few dozen bags.

Some of the relief workers who work in the camps, often must be cut in. The little boys, who slide out the food to the logistics men, often take a few dozen bags.

There is too a kinder reason for "leakage": relief workers desperately need to travel in or by an enough emergency food to sustain the refugees during the winter. That's what ended the drought last spring. Then they were able to open-month money as the Somali federal government arrived to seize the refugee food in the name of the Somali Democratic Republic.

More often, theft is covert but cooked by the thieves, then to hide anything.

At Belet Huen market, scores of bags of

diverted refugee food are on sale every day. The merchant selling corn, milk powder and sugar said his supplies came from refugees who had borrowed their rations for other commodities. But the merchant was dealing in unopened bags, with their original fasteners, and no refugee, no matter how many children in his class, is permitted to get a full unopened bag.

On the road to Belet Huen, in the market of a smaller town called Isalo Burti, a private truck was dropping off a ton of illegal British-sterilized and taken on replacement diesel U.S. corn. The driver was asked in Italian by the second language in southern Somalia where he was going with all the food. At last, when he understood the question, he grinned and replied, "To Isalo." Then he turned and told the Italian in Somali what he said to the forger and they all had a good laugh together.

Thief on the way cannot go unnoticed. Complaints from field workers soon reach the top of the aid hill on a twisting highway of rumors, or the stranger paths of gossip.

So, in Mogadishu, the director of the U.N. food program here, Robert J. Linsberg, said he was neither confused nor surprised by the level of theft in the refugee program.

"This has got to be the textbook of how not to run a major refugee operation."

"I'm not surprised it's all screwed up down there — food going every way was."

You left me where there are no assets in that world. Where can you ship \$100 million worth of commodities, with no control, and it's not going to get ripped off?

In another office in Mogadishu, Otto Haggenbueche, the director of the U.N. agency and the whole relief program, said he, too, knew about the theft. But stopping the theft, he said, is another matter.

"Over the last six months in particular, we have been able to improve significantly on the monitoring of the property situation. Our most concrete this as a progress situation. But at the same time, our capacity to influence the situation was not congruent with our monitoring capacity."

The theft was not possible to be just the work of a certain individual. He had to have certain support within the system. We have certain reports with the Somali government. But it is not so easy for them either to report, or to be caught.

Indeed, the whole relief machine comes down to the Somali, and has for two years, since the international aid program began.

If nothing has been said publicly, this too should not surprise. The relief business is a bad other business. There are careers and organizing lines to protect. And to one goes about in this business by badmouthing his own program, of picking fights with the "host country."

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STARVING CHILD AT ALI MATAN
An older child is more valuable

A different view of survival

By Scott Winslow
Examiner staff writer

"They think of Americans as incredibly spoiled children. They would like to milk us for what we have. They are not at all as we are knowing. They look you in the eye."

Maria Etiz and other members of Medical Volunteers International, the Bay Area relief agency in Somalia, found the behavior of the desperate people needing their help as strange as anything they encountered in their lives — but still worthy of sympathy under the circumstances.

Treatment of the many refugee children struck the relief workers as the most peculiar, yet comprehensible, aspect of Somali camp life. The kids were all thin and fourth-grade malnutrition — skin stretched over bone. But if they didn't want to drink or eat, the mothers didn't force them. They believe whatever happens is Allah's will," says nurse Andrea Krietz.

survived that long, that was a sign Allah wanted the child to live, and it was worth a trip to the doctor.

"It's very difficult for someone with Western thinking to work in that situation," Krietz says. Although the Somalis do indeed recognize that their children are human beings and give them ample love and attention, Etiz says, "Nobody tries to ensure that they have a happy childhood."

"They are respected members of the family, but not in the Western sense because parents do not emotionally get prepared to lose their children."

"An older child is more valuable than a younger child," Etiz adds. "When these skinny little kids arrived at the feeding centers, we took their weight and height and put hands on their wrists. The next day we were startled to find that fatter kids would show up with the same hands."

"What happened was the parents tried to make sure the children with greater chances for survival got the food. And that wasn't cruel. It was good sense."

TUMORBOB: The volunteers