The Year in Disasters 1993

Somalia: response without government

The conflict and chaos of Mogadishu in 1993 - including the killing of scores of UNOSOM peacekeeping troops and many hundreds of Somali civilians - concealed the start of a countrywide recovery from disaster, even though it is a recovery that is fragile, patchy and slow. And 1994 is beginning to answer the question: how can agencies work in the apparent vacuum of a country without government?

Between 300,000 and 500,000 Somalis - most of them children - are believed to have died from disease fostered by conflict-induced mass starvation in 1991 and 1992. A million or more of Somalia's people fled into Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and further afield as refugees or were displaced within the country. In 1993, after courageous efforts by Somali aid workers, medical staff and local leaders, supported by the ICRC, the Somali Red Crescent Society, Unicef and other humanitarian agencies, starvation retreated, significant improvements occurred in security in many areas of the country, widespread child immunisation and other disease-control methods began to take effect, and there was considerable growth in agriculture, livestock production and general economic activity from the low levels of the previous two years.

Aside from the cash injection into Somalia's economy - the UN peacekeeping operation has cost up to 10 times the value of all humanitarian aid - the role of UN military forces in assisting this process of recovery is debatable. As always, any confusion between political, military and humanitarian roles, motives and actions hampers efforts to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

The ostensible justification for international military intervention - to create a secure environment for the delivery of humanitarian relief because Mogadishu port was closed by militias and the vast majority of food aid was being looted - now appears to have been spurious: the port was not closed, the vast majority of food aid was not being looted, and the worst of the famine was all but over by late 1992 when the first UN task force arrived.

The collapse of government in 1991 fatally delayed humanitarian operations by UN specialised agencies, in part because of security fears, and for some because their mandate and structures are designed for partnerships with governments. That lack of central authority forced all humanitarian organisations to try, with varying degrees of success, to grapple with the sensitive complexities of Somali clan structures and deal with the calculated violence of 15 clan-linked militias, most of them using looted Somali army weapons originally supplied by both the Soviet Union and America during the country's cold war client- relationship with the superpowers.

There are grandiose plans launched by the UN and backed up by the military forces for a fast-track return to national government: 93 district councils in 1993 - many already viewed with suspicion and animosity by Somalis as puppets of UNOSOM -, 18 regional councils by

Despite the civil war, large amounts of relief supplies did get into Somalia, largely through the efforts of the local Somali Red Crescent working with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Amid controversy over the impact of militias on ports in Mogadishu and Kismayo, the innovative use of landing craft freed agencies to land import supplies on any beach in a country with the longest coastline in Africa.
Somalia. 1992. Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

early 1994, a transitional national council by March 1995, followed by national elections later that year. Unfortunately, the plans are ill-matched to either traditional Somali systems and pace of change or its divisive history of clan conflict during the parliamentary era in the 1970s, itself superseded by the bloody divide-and-rule tactics under the dictatorship of Siad Barre until his overthrow in January 1991

But in many parts of the country, especially the would-be breakaway region of Somaliland in the northwest (see Section One, Focus 4), traditional clan elders are reasserting their long-standing influence, and have begun negotiating workable security arrangements for their own people and for humanitarian agencies trying to assist those most in need Their efforts cannot guarantee peace in a country of warrior nomadic pastoralists, but they do offer better prospects of long-term security and effective conflict resolution than any externally-driven peace process. They reflect the realities of Somali society, are being developed and endorsed by Somalis themselves, and will be enforced by those with the greatest stake in their success or failure.

Stability and a confidence in the future - at least sufficient to plant crops which take a few months to grow - is obviously crucial in order to reduce the nutrition and health vulnerability of Somalis whose security was destroyed during militia fighting by far more complex factors than the simple denial of aid supplies and the impact of drought.

Militia forces and bandits taking advantage of the chaos directly looted rival clans' possessions and food supplies; the insecurity discouraged many from planting or harvesting crops or tending livestock; hundreds of thousands fled their land and herds because they were attacked or feared that they would be, especially in areas on the orders between clans or under mixed control, and the forced movement of people prevented them from using coping mechanisms traditional in time of food shortage, such as harvesting low-value famine foods, taking wage labour or relying on the support networks of fellow clan members Livestock productivity and incomes fell because nomadic grazing patterns were disrupted; and landless labourers and their families were denied work on bigger farms and irrigation schemes.

As people were forced off their land they had limited choices: to leave insecure clan border areas and move closer to their clan heartlands; head for the bigger towns, which initially offered a better prospect of food and whose markets could be used for distress sales of household goods; follow rumours of feeding centres or aid agency programmes; look for work in Somalia's main irrigated farming area between the Juba and Shebelle rivers south of Mogadishu, or head for the nearest international border in the hope of finding better security and humanitarian aid. Refugee situations are never static; large numbers of people come and go, often travelling great distances to visit relatives, check on herds, for trade, to look for food or work, and to assess security. Peaking at more than one million, the refugee total of people from Somalia living elsewhere in the Horn of Africa and Arabian Peninsula had already fallen by the beginning of 1993 to a total assessed by UNHCR at 704,744, mainly due to people returning from Ethiopia to the more secure areas in self- styled Somaliland in the north. By the end of the year, the number of refugees had fallen to 445,000, as more people were sufficiently reassured of security to return. In Ethiopia, 300,000 refugees were recorded in January 1993 and 100,000 by December; in Kenya, 327,744 in January and 280,000 12 months later; Djibouti was unchanged through the year at 20,000, while refugees who escaped by boat to Yemen numbered 57,000 in January and 45,000 in December. Up to 325,000 people were believed to be displaced within the north and south of Somalia at the end of 1993.

As well as security at home, there are other positive and negative reasons for people to return: living on the fringes of a war zone meant that camps close to insecure Somali borders were at risk of attack by armed looters, while there have been fre-

quent reports of women being raped in refugee camps in northern Kenya. Apart from the obvious trauma and risk of sexual disease - a growing problem in Somalia - the cultural norms of Somalia means that rape brings shame on the victim and her family, a crucial problem in a society where people's overall security relies fundamentally on community support.

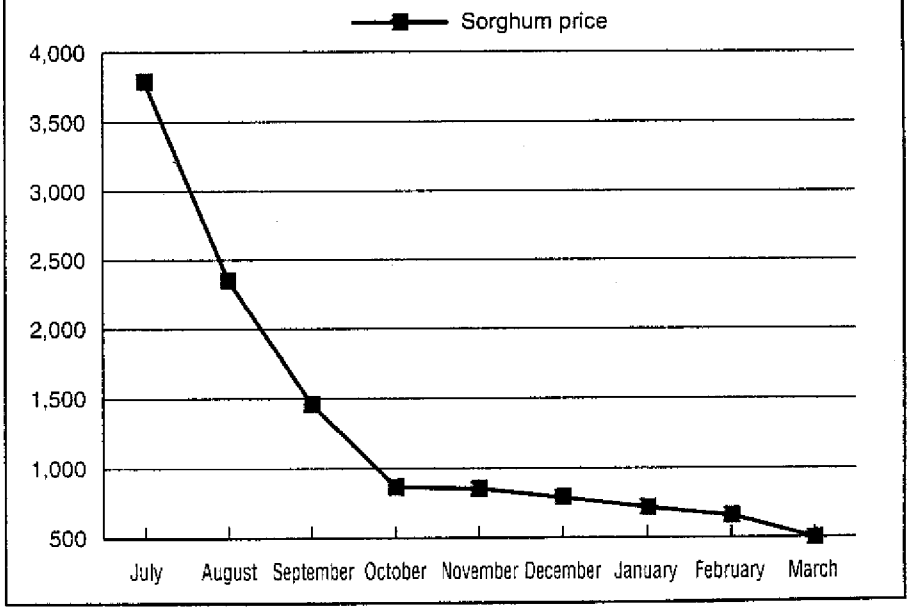
To assist and encourage return, UNHCR has created what it calls quick-impact projects, or QIPs, designed to respond to what refugees identify as the major problems. Family or village elders are assisted to make short visits to assess the situation in home areas and then help to design QIPs that range from rehabilitating wells to seed distribution, from materials for homes to small-scale irrigation. A well-organised return of entire villages is assisted with small grants of food and money.

Within Somalia, the massive death toll from insecurity, disease and denial of food was stemmed by the flood of food aid into Somalia, and its distribution through scores of feeding centres, most of which were run by the ICRC and the Somali Red Crescent Society. Feeding programmes were backed up by medical posts and immunisation programmes, as the biggest killer in famine is never simple starvation but a range of opportunistic diseases - measles, diarrhoea, respiratory infections, tuberculosis, malaria and more - exacerbated by malnutrition and lowered resistance, and spread rapidly by overcrowding, poor water and inadequate sanitation.

Responding to that priority, the Federation programme in Somalia now supports the Somali Red Crescent in creating a network of 50 health centres across the country, with at least 500 Red Crescent staff, and designed to reach a population of 500,000 people. As well as diagnosis and distribution of basic drugs, the centres will offer a range of treatments, mother and child services, including pregnancy monitoring and delivery, and the training of existing and new health workers. This compliments the emergency work by agencies such as Unicef, which during and in the wake of fighting managed to raise Somalia's pre-war 40% immunisation rate for measles to 70% and more, and made some progress

Mogadishu grain prices in early 1993

	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March
Somali Shillings	3,788	2,349	1,458	866	855	791	720	661	500



Grain prices in the open market actually fell long before the arrival of the main contingent of international peace-keeping troops in December 1992. By March they had reached near-normal levels as the Somali economy began to function again, despite the continued violence.

Source: CARE, Somalia, 1993

on other major killer diseases

All health efforts in Somalia must start from a low base, even in peacetime. As unreliable as official Somali government statistics may have been, they indicate serious health vulnerability, with 1987 life expectancy at just 47 years, infant mortality 150 per 1,000, under-five mortality 190 per 1,000, and 1981 maternal mortality of 1,100 per 100,000 live births. These figures will probably be substantially worse in 1994, even as the situation begins to recover.

The food crisis waned by mid- to late-1992, as the falling market prices of food in Mogadishu showed. Indeed, prices fell so far that it created another problem. Farmers began complaining by the end of the year that prices of 800-900 Somali shillings for a kilo of maize were lower than the 1,000-1,100 Somali shilling cost of local production, preventing a long-term recovery of agriculture and leaving farm labourers without any source of income. Without long-term confidence in food prices, even refugees and displaced people whose home areas are returning to peace are discouraged from leaving the security of feeding centres and guaranteed rations. It was at this stage that the ICRC took the decision to wind down its massive feeding operation, which jointly with the Somali Red Crescent fed one million people at its peak.

The recovery of agriculture gathered pace in 1993, assisted by higher prices and the return of better rains after two years of drought. Production is estimated to have reached around half of Somalia's entire needs, a large proportion of which are normally met by imports. The improvement in grazing and increased security in rural areas also had a major impact on Somalia's nomadic pastoralists, as have major programmes of veterinary care - ICRC vets treated or vaccinated more than 4.65 million animals - and the fast recovery of commercial veterinary businesses

The export of livestock - Somalia's principal foreign exchange earner at $100 million a year in 1987-1989 - collapsed when ports were unusable during the fighting. Although a lack of internationally-recognised veterinary certificates may have depressed prices, initial figures from the ICRC suggest that 1993 was Somalia's best year for exports in the last decade, with more than one million camels, cattle, sheep and goats going overseas.

That income has been part of a growing economic recovery, which takes full financial advantage of the presence of UN and humanitarian agencies, and the legitimate and illegitimate opportunities offered by the complete absence of government. Looted food, drugs and other supplies have produced thriving markets, the lack of border controls with, for once, mainly peaceful neighbours, allows almost unrestricted movement, while Africa's longest coastline - always a haven for smuggling - allows both international agencies and private businesses to avoid clan-controlled or militia-disputed ports.

The domestic economy and the receipt of millions of dollars - exchanged into Somali shillings in Mogadishu - in wages for the thousands employed by international agencies and the military, and in payments and bribes to local contractors, has ensured a surprisingly strong Somali currency. Far from collapsing with the government yet backed by nothing more than ordinary people's confidence, the Somali currency looted in vast quantities from banks remained freely convertible with the American dollar throughout the crisis. Floating at between 3,000 and 5,000 shillings to the dollar, close to its 3,800 shilling rate of December 1990 before Barre fell, the currency is an accurate measure of that confidence and the level of dollars in the marketplace, dipping in value during outbreaks of fighting and showing signs of weakening as UN troop departures, increased.

Despite the danger of further conflict, there are many reasons to see Somalia in a post-disaster situation of recovery and rehabilitation, though with far more advantages than normally found in many countries in that state. While many in the militias still feel it is their duty to take revenge on UNOSOM and rival fighters for past