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Theft of Food Aid in Somalia Should Lead to Congressional Oversight

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This summer, the Horn of Africa confronted its worst drought in decades. Estimates indicate that more than 12 million people across the region are vulnerable to starvation. Somalia, lacking a credible government and beset by internal instability and conflict, has been particularly hard hit, and the United Nations has formally declared that a famine exists in six regions of southern and central Somalia, including the region surrounding the capital of Mogadishu. It is believed that more than 4 million Somalis are at risk of starvation, and the U.N. has called on governments to provide more than \$1 billion to address the situation.¹

This call has been met by hundreds of millions in aid pledges, led by the United States. Subsequent news reports, however, have revealed that the disbursement of Somali aid has fallen victim to massive fraud and theft. Some reports indicate that half—or possibly more—of the famine assistance going to Somalia has been diverted from the intended recipients. This situation was entirely predictable, as previous aid efforts had similarly been plagued. With millions in U.S. taxpayer dollars at risk, Congress should investigate why the U.S. failed to demand or the U.N. failed to implement appropriate safeguards and oversight for this aid, when experience clearly indicated that past controls proved inadequate.

A History of Poor Oversight. The U.N. has a history of aid to Somalia being stolen or misused. Following the ouster of former dictator General Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia was left in a prolonged state of conflict and instability, which continues for large parts of the country to this day. The instability,

combined with drought, created food shortages and mass starvation. The U.N.'s attempts to deliver food were hindered by clan militias, who used the food as a resource to expand their power and influence.² Some reports at the time indicated that up to 80 percent of the internationally provided food relief was stolen, and some aid was traded across borders in exchange for arms.³ A year later, the United States intervened under Operation Restore Hope, sending 25,000 U.S. servicemen to rescue the food relief operation through security and logistical support to U.N. peacekeepers. The U.S. mission ended a year later, shortly after 18 Army Rangers were killed in the infamous Black Hawk Down incident.

Last year, the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia reported a similar story to the Security Council. According to the report, international humanitarian assistance, notably food aid, was being diverted to or appropriated by armed factions. Worse, Somali contractors charged with delivering the international food assistance were charged with complicity in this diversion.⁴ Specifically, Omar Adaani, Abdulqadir Mohamed Nur “Enow,” and Mohamed Deylaaf, who secured 80 percent of the World Food Programme’s (WFP) delivery contracts, were linked

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to armed factions, including al Shabaab—which is listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department.⁵ Much of the WFP aid was delivered to armed factions instead of those in need.

Following the release of the monitoring group's report, the U.N. met with WFP staff and external auditors more than 15 times to discuss how to better deliver humanitarian assistance. During the meetings, the information on contractors was reviewed and the U.N. subsequently announced the cancellation of contracts with the three main contractors.

American Tax Dollars at Risk. The challenges of delivering food aid in Somalia remain great. The country remains unstable, and some of the most desperate areas are under the control of al Shabaab or other armed groups. The need to enhance verification and delivery of food aid has not been adequately unaddressed.

Verification of aid delivery in Somalia was relegated to a lower priority by the current famine crisis. More than half of Somalia's population is estimated to require food aid.⁶ As famine conditions worsened, the Obama Administration expanded its relief efforts. According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton:

[T]otal U.S. humanitarian assistance to the region [increased] to more than \$580 million

this year. We are reaching more than 4.6 million people with this aid... The United States is now providing \$92 million in emergency humanitarian assistance inside Somalia. To facilitate aid within Somalia's central and southern region, we have recently issued new guidance about the use of U.S. funds to help aid groups working with the United States Government try to save more lives.⁷

To deliver this aid rapidly, the U.N. and the U.S. loosened guidelines established last year in the wake of evidence of food theft and corruption. Predictably, thousands of sacks of grain, peanuts, and other food staples bearing stamps from WFP, USAID, Japan, and Kuwait have been stolen by armed groups or otherwise diverted from the intended recipients and are being sold in Mogadishu markets. According to the Associated Press:

An official in Mogadishu with extensive knowledge of the food trade said he believes a massive amount of aid is being stolen—perhaps up to half of recent aid deliveries. The percentage had been lower, he said, but in recent weeks the flood of aid into the capital with little or no controls has created a bonanza for businessmen.⁸

The Associated Press also reported that the WFP is again working with a contractor who was blamed

1. U.N. News Centre, "In Mogadishu, UN Refugee Chief Urges Scale-up of Aid for Displaced Somalis," September 1, 2011, at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=39427&Cr=Somali&Cr1> (September 6, 2011), and Gabe Joselow, "U.N. to Announce Somalia Famine Spreading to New Region," Voice of America, September 2, 2011, at <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/UN-to-Announce-Somalia-Famine-Spreading-to-New-Region-129099493.html> (September 6, 2011).
2. James Phillips, "Somalia and al-Qaeda: Implications for the War on Terrorism," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1526, April 5, 2002, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/04/somalia-and-al-qaeda-implications-for-the-war-on-terrorism>.
3. Thomas Sheehy, "To Save the Starving, Internationalize the Peacekeeping Force in Somalia," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 992, December 15, 1992, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1992/12/bg922nbsp-to-save-the-starving>.
4. Monitoring Group on Somalia, "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)," March 10, 2010, at <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20100317somalia.pdf> (September 6, 2011).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Gabe Joselow, "U.N. to Announce Somalia Famine Spreading."
7. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, "Remarks on the Food Crisis in the Horn of Africa," International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C., August 11, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/08/170417.htm> (September 6, 2011).
8. Katherine Houreld, "Somalia Famine Aid Stolen, UN Investigating," Associated Press, August 16, 2011, at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/world/africa/5450914/Somalia-famine-aid-stolen-UN-investigating> (September 6, 2011).

in a 2010 U.N. report for diverting large amounts of food aid. While the WFP did not reveal how much aid has been stolen or diverted, it denied that up to half it was lost.

Last month, the WFP acknowledged that it is in the process of investigating the reports of theft and other divergence of aid, while stating it has a “zero-tolerance” policy for any food aid that fails to reach those in need. If WFP is again contracting with individuals or companies previously found to be corrupt and complicit in food aid theft, this is a gross violation of its fiduciary duty and places at risk hundreds of millions in U.S. food aid.

Congress Should Bring Accountability to Aid Distribution. The desire to provide assistance to suffering Somalis is understandable and admirable. But the responsibility of Congress and the Administration for taxpayer dollars compels

them to make sure that appropriate protections are in place to prevent misuse, especially when past aid efforts had proven so susceptible to fraud and theft. Congress should convene hearings to look into this matter closely and demand answers on what procedures are in place to prevent theft and misuse of American food assistance in Somalia—and why those procedures evidently have fallen short.

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