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Prepared Statement of

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before the

United States Senate
Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on African Affairs

on

"Responding to Drought and Famine in the Horn of Africa"

Wednesday, August 3, 2011
10:00 a.m.
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419
Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Isakson, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I would like to thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today on the drought and famine conditions in the Horn of Africa in general and in Somalia in particular, as well as on the response of the United States and other members of the international community to this growing crisis.

As we meet, the situation especially critical—the head of the United Nations refugee agency describes it as the "worst humanitarian disaster" in the world today—with nearly half of the Somali population, some 3.7 million people, facing starvation while at least another 11 million men, women, and children across the Horn of Africa are thought to be at risk.

Given this grim reality, the first concern of the international community is, understandably, focused where it should be anyway: getting relief to the victims. However, in addressing immediate needs, attention should also be paid to the broader geopolitical context as well as the long-term implications of the challenges before us. Since other witnesses testifying today are better to positioned, individually and institutionally, to address the technical questions relating to the scope of the crisis, its impact on vulnerable populations, and the logistics of getting assistance to them, I will concentrate on four key points which I believe the United States and other responsible international actors should bear in mind in assessing the current situation and determining adequate responses to it, as well as planning longer-term engagement with this region:

1. *Al-Shabaab's responsibility in exacerbating the crisis.* While the group cannot be blamed for the desertification trends, climate change, and meteorological conditions, the violent conflict it has engaged in and the economic and political policies it has pursued have certainly worsened a bad situation.

2. *Far from being a part of the solution, Somalia's "Transitional Federal Government" (TFG) is part of the problem—in fact, a not insignificant cause of the ongoing crisis.* The regime's unelected officials may be preferable to the insurgents seeking to overthrow them, but they represent, at best, the international community's choice for the lesser of two evils.

3. *The sheer number of people on the move in and from Somali territory will have enormous and possibly permanent consequences for the region.* The potential population shifts threaten to upend delicate political balances as well as present new security challenges for the Horn of Africa and beyond.

4. *Amid the crisis, there is, nonetheless, an opportunity to promote stability and security within Somalia, if not across the Horn of Africa.* In fact, there is a narrow window of opportunity during which it might be possible to seriously weaken and possibly even finish al-Shabaab as a major force in Somali politics once and for all.

Al-Shabaab's Role in the Crisis

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen ("Movement of Warrior Youth," al-Shabaab) is not only linked ideologically with the global jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda and, increasingly, operationally with Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), it is also an entity that richly deserves to opprobrium for its singular role in making what in any event would have been a very bad situation far, far worse.

There is no doubt that the insecurity it has caused since it began its violent insurgency four years ago added greatly to the sufferings of the Somali people. Moreover, while al-Shabaab is far from a monolithic organization, its leadership does have a history of denying access to the areas under its control to UN relief agencies like UNICEF and the World Food. For their part, as is now well known, last year the international agencies as well as several nongovernmental organizations pulled out of several areas under the control of al-Shabaab after several aid workers were killed and the group began imposing strict conditions on their remaining colleagues, extorting "security fees" and "taxes." Moreover, because al-Shabaab has been designated as an international terrorist organization by the United States and a number of other countries, NGOs have avoided working in areas it controls for fear of running afoul of laws against providing material support to terrorist groups.

As a matter of fact—one which a number of analysts, including myself, have noted for some time and which was confirmed by the annual report to the UN Security Council by its Sanctions Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea, a document released just last week—although al-Shabaab has profited, either by diversion or "taxation," from humanitarian aid, the amounts represented at most a small fraction of its overall revenue stream. Consequently, it heartening to see that the administration is working to clarify and, where necessary, ease the relevant restrictions in order to facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations.

A far more important source of income for the group is, in fact, more directly related to the humanitarian crisis: the industrial production for export of charcoal. While people living between the Juba and Shabelle rivers in southern Somalia have gathered charcoal for their own use from the region's acacia forests from time immemorial, it is only in the last few years that the production has reached its present unsustainable levels. It is estimated that somewhere around two-thirds of the forests which used to cover some 15 percent of Somali territory has been reduced to chunks of "black gold," packed into 25-kilogram bags, and shipped to countries in the Persian Gulf which have themselves banned the domestic production of charcoal. The UN Monitoring Group conservatively estimates that up to 4.5 million of these sacks are exported each year, primarily through the port of Kismayo, which has been controlled by al-Shabaab or other forces allied to its cause since September 2008, earning the group millions of dollars in profits. Meanwhile, where once there were the old-growth acacia stands, thorn bushes now proliferate, rendering the areas useless to the Somali people, whether they be pastoralists or agriculturalists (the former graze their livestock in the grass that flourishes where the root systems of acacia groves hold in ground water and prevent erosion, while the latter grow staple crops in neighboring lands so long as there are tree stands holding in top soil), and contributing further to the desertification that is always a persistent threat in a land as arid or semi-arid as Somalia. Thus, it was both simultaneously tragic and ironic that, when a heavy rain came briefly this past weekend to what was formerly the country's breadbasket, the result was not deliverance, but disaster as, absent any foliage to help absorb the precipitation, flash floods compounded the misery in several places.

Al-Shabaab also operates a complex system of taxation on residents within areas it controls and imposes levies not just on aid groups, but also businesses, sales transactions, and land. The tax on arable land in particular has had the effect of changing the political economy of farming communities which previously eked out a living just above subsistence. For example, in Bakool and Lower Shabelle—precisely the two areas at the epicenter of the famine—communities used to grow their own food and, whenever possible, stored any surplus sorghum or maize against times of hardship. However, when al-Shabaab imposed a monetary levy on acreage, farmers were pushed into growing cash crops like sesame which could be sold to traders connected with the Islamist movement's leadership for export in order to obtain the funds to pay the obligatory "jihad war contributions." However rich in anti-oxidants sesame seeds may be, they are of rather limited value for purposes of food security.

If all this were not bad enough, once the famine set in, al-Shabaab leaders have alternated between denying the crisis—arguing instead that accounts of hunger were being "exaggerated" in order to undermine their hold over the populace—and preventing affected people from moving in search of food. Whether or not it is a formal policy of the group or not, there are credible reports from sources on the ground of at least several "holding areas" in Lower Shabelle where al-Shabaab forces are using force or the threat thereof to prevent displaced people from leaving its territory to find help.

Somalia's Dysfunctional TFG

In Congressional testimony two years ago, I noted that the TFG was "not a government by any common-sense definition of the term: it is entirely dependent on foreign troops…to protect its small enclave in Mogadishu, but otherwise administers no territory; even within this restricted zone, it has shown no functional capacity to govern, much less provide even minimal services to its citizens." And that was *before* the famine.

Despite the fact that, at not inconsiderable sacrifice, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping force protecting the regime has managed to extend its operational reach to now be present in thirteen of Mogadishu's sixteen districts—although the force commander, Ugandan Major General Nathan Mugisha, acknowledges that his troops "dominate" in just "more than half of these"—the TFG remains hobbled by corruption and infighting. Quite frankly, the so-called "government" lead by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed is little better than a criminal enterprise—one that its own auditors reported stole more than 96 percent of the bilateral assistance it received in the years 2009 and 2010. The findings contained in the UN Monitoring Group report were perhaps even more damning: "Diversion of arms and ammunition from the Transitional Federal Government and its affiliated militias has been another significant source of supply to arms dealers in Mogadishu, and by extension to al-Shabaab." The investigators even highlighted case where an RPG launcher and associated

munitions, purchased for the regime under a U.S. State Department contract, found their way into a stronghold of al-Shabaab that AMISOM captured earlier this year.

It should thus come as no surprise that such "leaders" are of limited helpfulness in the face of the present humanitarian emergency. They are likely to see it as yet another opportunity to capture rents, especially since their already extended mandate expires in two weeks and it is for want of a ready-made "Plan B" that the international community is not taking issue with the TFG's leaders arbitrarily proroguing their terms of office by another year—although on what legal grounds is anyone's guess. (No wonder the official position of the Government of the United States, expressed in a brief filed before the U.S. Supreme Court last year by then-Solicitor-General Elena Kagan as well as the Legal Advisor of the Department of State, is that since the fall of the dictator Muhammad Siyad Barre in 1991, "the United States has not recognized any entity as the government of Somalia" and that federal courts should "not attach significance to statements of the TFG" absent specific guidance from the executive branch.)

Mass Migration

Given this context, it should come as no surprise that Somalis are on the move. The Dabaab refugee camp in northeastern Kenya, which was built in 1992 during the last great Somali famine to temporarily house 90,000 people, nowadays hosts more than 400,000, with more than one thousand additional persons arriving each day. Another 112,000 refugees have found shelter in the Dollo Ado area of Ethiopia. And these are the lucky ones: it is estimated that there are possibly 1.5 million Somalis internally displaced within their own country, with some unfortunates even literally caught in the no man's land at outskirts of Mogadishu between the frontline positions of the insurgents and AMISOM troops. And, it needs to be emphasized that all of this is before the coming months when conditions are expected to be even worse.

Given the parlous conditions prevalent across the territory of the former Somali state (outside of Somaliland in the northwest, Puntland in the northeast, and possibly a few other places), it is virtually assured that any Somali who crosses the border into Kenya or Ethiopia is likely to become *ipso facto* a permanent emigrant (after all, Somalia's contemporary economy, it should not be forgotten, has been transformed into one built upon remittances from the Diaspora). In any event, since there has been no rush of third countries offering resettlement to the preexistent Somali refugee population before the famine, there is no reason to think that things will be different with the influx of new arrivals. Kenya and Ethiopia, however, are beset with complicated issues with their own ethnic Somali minorities; neither country is in much of a position to absorb hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of itinerant Somalis.

Consequently a population shift such as what we are witnessing in the Horn of Africa—a literal exodus of Biblical proportions--threatens to upend delicate political balances as well as present a host of new security challenges. In fact, concerns over security and the adequate screening

(or lack thereof) of Somalis entering their country have already exposed one rift within Kenya's national unity government between Prime Minister Raila Odinga, who opened the border as a humanitarian gesture, and some of his ministers who oppose the move. A quick perusal of Kenyan newspapers is enough to confirm that this question will undoubtedly enjoy a high profile as the East African country enters its electoral season next year.

Thus, if they are not to cause, however unintentionally, even greater harm, responses to the mass migration set in motion first by the prolonged Somali crisis and now the famine need to take factor in these realities.

A Chance for Stability and Security

If one dares contemplate a silver lining to the current crisis—although it comes at a terrible price—it is that it has apparently caught al-Shabaab off guard.

For a long time, despite the extremist ideology espoused by its foreign-influenced leaders which set them outside the mainstream of Somali culture and society, al-Shabaab at could present itself as being better (even if harsher) rulers than the corrupt denizens of the TFG. The brutal *hudud* punishments its tribunals meted out, for example, may have been utterly alien from the Somali experience, but it was a rough justice nonetheless and better than the chaos and lawlessness that was the experience of many Somalis in the 1990s. Moreover, the group managed to wrap itself up in the mantle of Somali nationalism by portraying the African Union peacekeepers as foreign occupiers, although the fact that AMISOM troops are propping up the despised TFG and, in the process, cause civilian casualties, made this narrative all the more credible.

Within the last year, however, AMISOM has improved its capabilities and managed to lower civilian casualties even as it pushed al-Shabaab forces back within Mogadishu. In addition, the famine and al-Shabaab's clumsy response to it have thoroughly dispelled any delusions about the "good governance" capabilities by the movement. Now the effects of famine are not only exacerbated by al-Shabaab, but the disaster has exposed divisions within the movement with some of its local councils and militias expressing a willingness to accept help even as the leadership continues to spurn it. Moreover, actions like the blocking of people trying to escape the famine will sap al-Shabaab of what remains of its popular legitimacy. (Of course, if one is seeking to use this opportunity to undermine al-Shabaab, it would be helpful if a prospect more attractive than domination by the venal TFG was offered to communities just freed from the militants' yoke.)

While there is undoubtedly some risk in sending aid areas where al-Shabaab operates, it is more probable that whatever negative effects the assistance will have will fall largely on the group, either as some of its local leaders defect or populations are weaned from their reliance

on them. And there are organizations—not all of them necessarily international—with a track record of delivering assistance, even within al-Shabaab held areas, without allowing resources to be diverted. One that comes to mind is SAACID, the extraordinary nongovernmental organization founded and directed by Somali women, which is engaged in conflict transformation, women's empowerment, education, healthcare, emergency relief, employment schemes, and development. SAACID's *modus operandi* is a model for others. SAACID gets food from, among other partners, the World Food Program—when, that is, the latter agency has any. By working closely with clan elders and community members, it embeds itself in its immediate surroundings and thus can carry on in areas where, for example, the WFP can no longer go because the presence of al-Shabaab. Thus, during the height of the fighting in Mogadishu in recent years, SAACID was literally the only entity that was present in all sixteen of the capital's districts, providing some 80,000 2,000-calorie meals daily to some of the most vulnerable residents.

Such a model is one way the international community can get assistance to drought-affected populations and do so where they are, rather than requiring that these poor people displace themselves and, consequently, create additional challenges which will have to be dealt with further down the road after the initial emergency has passed.

And it goes without saying that should security be improved in Somalia and the mass emigration halted, if not reversed, the prospects for the increasingly important subregion at the crossroads of the Africa and the Middle East will brighten immensely.

Conclusion

Confronted with the dreadful specter of mass starvation on a scale not seen in more than half a century, the priority most assuredly is to get life-giving assistance to those most at risk and to do so in the most timely, efficient, and effective manner possible. However, urgency is no dispensation from the ethical and political responsibility both to understand to what caused or heightened the emergency and to consider the possible consequences of any proposed responses to it. Increased material resources are clearly needed, but even more, what is required is sustained engagement and not a little bit of strategic vision.