

No Man's Land

Violence is on the rise in the failed state of Somalia, and now aid workers are the targets.

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NEWSWEEK

Last month Somali pirates hijacked a ship bound for Kenya, snatching both \$30 million in military equipment and prolonged international attention. The true crisis, however, is on the mainland, where escalating civil strife is exacting a dramatic humanitarian toll. In the past nine months, more than 870,000 civilians have fled their homes. Over 50 humanitarian aid organizations have helicoptered into Mogadishu and elsewhere to provide emergency relief for those who remain in the failed state. Now, both extreme Islamic militant groups and money-seeking criminal gangs are targeting the aid workers themselves; 111 serious incidences ranging from abduction to murder have been reported this year. Many agencies are suspending their operations or fleeing Somalia altogether, making the plight of the 3.25 million internal refugees all the worse. The result, warn some experts, could be a catastrophic famine.

NEWSWEEK's Morgan Brennan spoke with David Gilmour, the Somalia country director for CARE, one of the largest international NGOs providing food and water there, about aid-worker abductions, clan justice and the looming threat of famine.

NEWSWEEK: What 's the situation on the ground like right now?

David Gilmour: It's the worst it's been here since 1991-92, when the formal government fell. There are 1.1 million people displaced because of the recent fighting, and more than 40 percent of the population needs humanitarian assistance. Fighting has made it extremely dangerous for aid operations to function effectively. The infrastructure is completely broken. There have been many consecutive years of drought. Coupled with skyrocketing food and fuel prices and no employment opportunities, the immediate emergency needs are food and water.

Who exactly is responsible for this violence?

It can be attributed to many different groups that are in Somalia—politically motivated groups or criminal groups looking for personal gain. Opportunists taking advantage of the situation see aid workers as an easy target for extorting money. Extreme [political] groups see them as potential targets, too.

But why the sudden increase in violence?

Imagine a whole generation of kids born 17 years ago who have known nothing else but civil strife. With no formal government in power, the clans have held their communities together with their own forms of justice. In the past when there have been security incidences, the elders would resolve them within hours, maybe a couple of days. They no longer have that control.

What kind of violence is taking place?

It has been very random, unpredictable. This year, there have been 28 deaths and 12 aid workers currently kidnapped. The number [of kidnappings] was much higher earlier this year, but some have been released. In some cases, there has been contact by the groups for money. Two of our national workers have been kidnapped, but there have been no demands placed on CARE, just silence, which is very worrying.

There have been a number of prominent clan members and influential people who have been killed because they have spoken out against these actions. Numerous threats have been directed at organizations and individuals. The threats are followed by assassinations by pistol or, in more dramatic cases, with remote-control explosive devices targeting vehicles.

How are aid organizations responding to the violence and what will this mean for Somalis dependent upon aid?

There are a number of organizations like CARE, who have suspended their efforts in certain locations for a period of time until hopefully the situation resolves itself. We haven't closed, but we have suspended certain locations. We are hopeful that we can return to those locations. The last thing we want to do is abandon them. If it is totally impossible for humanitarian access, we are looking at one of the largest catastrophes that the world will see in this decade.

We are faced with horrible questions: Do we risk our staff or our partners' lives to deliver aid when there have been threats or when one of our staff has been abducted? Do we suspend or stop our operations when the Somali people who are relying on our aid to survive would not be able to receive it? We look for creative solutions to be able to meet our humanitarian objectives. Millions of people need emergency food and water, and we need access to get to these people.

Just how close are we to a severe famine?

If the rains fail and there is increased drought, the projection toward a humanitarian catastrophe where thousands, maybe millions, would die will be fast-tracked.