

Red Sea Tensions Are Reaching Horn of Africa—Can These Worsen the Humanitarian Crisis There?

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There has been a lot of hectic international activity in the Horn of Africa region this year. As the Houthis increased their attacks on several ships in the Red Sea to create pressure for stopping Israeli aggression in Gaza, the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa was re-emphasized with a new cutting edge prompting various activities on the part of various stakeholders.

The US government has decided to set up 5 military bases for the Danab Brigade in Somalia—which is described as a US sponsored Special Ops Force. This is meant to help this brigade to improve its counter-terrorism abilities in dealing with the Al-Shabab terror group. However analysts are seeing this also in the context of the growing problems in the Red Sea region as Somalia is located in strategically important proximity to the Red Sea and more particularly its Baab al Mandeb through which so much of the international sea trade traffic connecting Europe and Asia passes.

Secondly, Ethiopia has reached an agreement with Somaliland, the breakaway part of Somalia, to obtain about 20 km of coastland on lease, while at the same time Ethiopia is likely to recognize the independent status of Somaliland. At present some countries have diplomatic presence in Somaliland but have not recognized Somaliland as an independent country. So a question that has been raised is whether this will not lead to increasing tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia as from the point of view Somalia the land that is being leased still belongs to Somalia. Recognition of Somaliland's independence by Egypt may have the same effect of increasing tensions. However Ethiopia which invaded Somalia around 2006-07 has sought to downplay tensions saying that following the secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia and its emergence as an independent country in 1993 Ethiopia needs some access to sea for its economic and trade interests and it is only trying to fulfill this need without having any aggressive motive.

Thirdly Türkiye has reached agreement with Somalia for strengthening its security needs as well as its own strategic presence in the region. UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also in the process of making somewhat similar moves.

These recent political chess games are likely to add to the tensions of a volatile region which had already had more than its share of tensions. Eritrea has already emerged as an independent country after fighting for this against Ethiopia for over 3 decades (1960-1990). Ethiopia has been engaged in suppressing another secessionist movement in recent years. Somaliland has also separated from Somalia for practical purpose although this is not formally recognized by the international community. The activities of the terror group Al Shabab have been a source of much disruption and uncertainty. At the same time unfortunately big power roles in the region including proxy wars have also caused massive distress. The roots of at least some of the terrorism can be traced to highly objectionable activities of some of the big powers particularly the USA. Earlier of course colonial forces of various European forces particularly Italy had caused enormous distress in this region.

All this war and violence have taken place at a time when climate change and worsening disasters have been creating very difficult conditions for the rural people including the pastoral and farming communities. Due to violence, war and terror, there were increasing difficulties in sustaining the otherwise well-developed traditional methods of sustaining livelihoods. To give an example, how can nomadic pastoral groups migrate from one place to another when there is violence all over? Disruption of pastoralism also affects farming due to intricate relationships.

The greater part of the Horn of Africa region has been seeing a steady worsening of hunger and starvation, as four years of rain failure have tested the limits of the coping mechanisms of people.

In Somalia, a country of around 16 million people, nearly 260,000 people are reported to have died in the famine of 2010-11. The international community was alerted to the serious threat at a very late stage then. More recently there have been more warnings from the United Nations and other sources but nevertheless aid commitments are much lesser than actual needs.

Earlier Somalia used to get much of its food imports from Russia and Ukraine, but these supplies have become very difficult in more recent times. The situation for some time has been particularly serious in southern and central parts, particularly Baidoa and Burhakaba, according to reports. A recent UN report said that 3 million animals have died in recent times.

There is also the problem of humanitarian workers not having easy access to areas affected by conflicts. Some of these areas have a large number of internally displaced persons.

The situation of hunger is also reported to be serious in Ethiopia, particularly its southern and eastern parts, and in Kenya, particularly northern and eastern parts. In mid-August 2022, the World Food Programme stated that nearly 22 million people are at risk of starvation in these three countries which now face the worst drought in 40 years following four years of rain failures. These three countries (Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya) have a total population of around 185 million people. In addition we must include the needs of the people of Eritrea.

However some agencies refer to a Greater Horn of Africa region, including other countries Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda as well, sometimes including yet others. In August the WHO released a statement saying that 37 million people including 7 million children less than five years of age are at serious risk. While serious drought is the main issue in the bulk of this region, South Sudan has suffered from three years of consecutive flooding, this statement said. Nearly 8.3 million people here, or almost 75% of the population, face serious risks. During the last year, internal fighting by armed groups has added to the woes of Sudan, causing massive displacement once again.

It is strange indeed that in a region which is experiencing such a serious situation, regarding which repeated warnings too are being voiced by the United Nations, there has not yet been adequate commitment of essential aid funds from various parts of the world. A well-funded system of ensuring relief should have been in place by now, not having to worry much about the funding part so as to be able to devote more attention to detailed planning, but unfortunately the situation we still see is that even essential funding is lagging behind. In addition there have been complaints of flaws in the relief system, for instance relief grain being given at a time when it had an adverse impact on grain price received by farmers. Such mistakes should be corrected, and it should be very clear that big power rivalries or political considerations will not stand in the way of relief supplies reaching the most needy and deserving people.

If one looks at all the frivolous and wasteful expenditure taking place in some of the richest countries, what is needed to meet the most essential needs of the people of this region (suffering from some of the worst disaster situations and the worst impacts of climate change, resulting in turn in very serious hunger/starvation situation and impending famine) is only a very small share of this , but even this is not becoming available readily and the aid commitments still (at a time when several areas are close to famine) are falling much short of what is required.

Of course just now the most pressing need is to somehow make available adequate food and meet other basic needs as well as to set in place relief disbursement systems with community involvement so that all those who need urgent help can be covered. But later there is also a clear need to go beyond this and also look at how time-honored coping mechanisms and survival strategies for difficult times have been disrupted due to not just conflicts but also distorted development strategies and projects pushed by big business interests. While the need for having development priorities and patterns which are most appropriate keeping in view local conditions has always been there, this need has increased all the more in recent times of climate change. The bigger challenge ahead is to move towards such development patterns which are most in keeping with local needs and conditions.

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