

RELIEF OPERATIONS IN THE SOMALI REGION: REPORT ON THE AFTERMATH OF FLOODING IN THE GODE AREA

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Introduction

Unseasonable heavy rainfalls in the Ethiopian highlands during late October and early November led to serious flooding in eastern and south-eastern parts of the country. In the Ethiopian Somali National Regional State mainly the lower reaches of the Shebelle, Genale (Juba in Somalia), Weib (seasonal) and Dawa rivers flooded extensive areas along their banks. In a statement released 19 November, the new head of the Somali region, Mohammed Mealin, reported that a total of 297 people had lost their lives in the flood affected areas of the region and that more than 12,000 domestic animals were reported lost, some 30,000 hectares of cropland inundated and 4,252 homes destroyed. According to later reports, out of 80,000 families (or about 400,000 individuals) affected, a total of some 16,000 families (80,000 individuals) lost their homes and became destitute. The Ethiopian Government responded with an airlift of relief goods while helicopters were deployed to rescue people stranded and to shuttle supplies to villages cut-off from any road access. A Government appeal for external assistance met with a favourable response. Details of emergency response efforts are reflected in the UNDP-EUE's latest "Monthly Situation Report for Ethiopia" (November) and in an update prepared by the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) in Geneva (11 December).

The objective of this brief UNDP-EUE Mission to Gode (18-20 December) was to get an impression of the current status of the ongoing relief activities and to visit flood affected areas further downstream Southeast of Gode. The latter attempt failed due to severe logistic constraints which will be elaborated below.

Severe logistic constraints

After French armed forces based in Djibouti concluded their ten day helicopter air-lift operation (25 November to 5 December), two helicopters of the Ethiopian Defence Forces were the only aircraft to continue shuttling relief goods from Gode airport to disaster targets in Gode and Afder Zones. While the French helicopters had a nominal carrying capacity of 1.5 tons each, the Ethiopian helicopters provide a capacity of 2.5 tons each. But since flights were usually accompanied by members of assessment teams (and occasionally by media representatives) it was not possible to make use of the full loading capacity to transport relief goods such as grains, biscuits, plastic sheets, blankets, jerrycans, sugar and human and veterinary medicines. Since most roads leading to affected areas were disrupted (and still are), relief good transportation continues to rely on airlift operations, which went on, due to rather limited carrying capacity, somewhat sluggishly. While only very recently the first short haul trucks started to dispatch relief goods using the Gode - Kelafo road, the continuation of helicopter services appears to be of crucial importance. However, on the morning of 18 December, the two Ethiopian Defense Force helicopters took off north-bound, reportedly without prior announcement. Without knowing if and when the helicopter services might be resumed, everybody involved in the relief operation was left with deep concern, particularly the members of the Regional Task Force, who continue to hope for a resumption of air services, especially since 26,000 litres of jet A-1 fuel are still in stock at Gode airport (as of 20 December).

The Regional Task Force chaired by administration representative Abdirahman Ugas Muhumad and composed of 20 members including representatives of regional line ministries, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society, the central Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) and two observers from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC based in Gode) was formed in Gode in mid-

November to coordinate and manage relief activities in Gode and Afder Zones. The Task Force is facing numerous logistical constraints, particularly after the departure of the helicopters.

Since the rains ceased in early December, the road from Gode through Denan and Kebredehar to the regional capital, Jigjiga seems to be open. However, in a south-east direction the road is only passable as far as Kelafo, leaving the still flooded town of Mustahil and the border town of Ferfer out of overland reach. Further afield, many locations in both Gode and Afder Zone are even in normal times accessible only by pack animals or by air. Numerous places remain unvisited - even previously during the helicopter operations it was not possible to cover all areas where people live and possibly suffer. Areas not visited include -for instance- Hargele, El Kere, Godusbo, Labashilindi and Adi Adeye — the latter being located east of Denan and possibly flood affected by seasonal tributaries of the Shebelle river. Moreover, even locations in the hinterland far away from any rivers have reportedly suffered from heavy local rains leading to flooding in depressions.

Only a very limited number of light vehicles are available to ferry medical goods and assessment or monitoring personnel. Trucks have to be hired from the business community in Gode at a rate of 1.50 Birr per ton per kilometer (bringing the cost of a 10 ton delivery on the 90 kilometer road from Gode to Kelafo to 1,350 Birr — approximately \$200). The price of diesel has risen from normally 500 to 600 Birr per 200 litres barrel to 1,150 Birr (on 18 December). Given these ground movement constraints and in the absence of the possibility to join a helicopter transport, the UNDP-EUE mission was not able, as anticipated, to travel to the affected areas south-east of Gode.

The Task Force is facing other constraints besides the transportation problems: Since operations started, none of the relief workers have been paid salaries nor *per diems* - cash flow so far is based on loans from the local administration and the state farm. Lack of office and communication equipment, lack of manpower (personnel and experts), lack of fuel are further impediments to the relief operation.

Losses and damage might be higher than initially estimated

In September this year a population census was carried out in Somali Region. Results, however, are not yet released. The absence of reliable population data (including a breakdown of sedentary and nomadic population figures) makes it, in addition to the constraints mentioned above, difficult to provide a thorough analysis of losses and damage in the areas affected by heavy rains and river floods. In the course of the work carried out so far, the Task Force, however, puts estimates of losses in human and animal lives, in houses and farmlands considerably higher than the figures released in November (summarised above in the "Introduction"). Health risks both for humans and animals are increasing. With stagnant water providing breeding grounds for mosquito larvae, the threat of malaria is on the rise. Livestock are suffering diseases (such as foot-rot) which have not occurred in the area for a long time. Moreover, population groups not primarily affected by floods have begun suffer from secondary effects by loosing income possibilities. The mission visited a camp of an estimated 10,000 destitute returnees, living at the outskirts of Gode town since 1991/92. Among very few healthy looking children a lot of moderately and numbers of severely malnourished children were seen. A mother, too emaciated to continue lactation, keeping her dying baby in her arms, told the mission that on visiting the local hospital she had been turned away since she had no financial means to cover treatment. Most people in this camp, which reportedly last received food support in April 1997, used to make a little cash by selling water, firewood and grass cut by the river as animal fodder. But given the post-flood conditions, these means of income were considerably reduced. The mission spoke at Gode market to some women from the returnee camp trying to sell grass as animal fodder for 10 Ethiopian cents a bundle - nobody was buying it since after the floods animals find enough grazing land.

The market is relatively well stocked with staple foods and basic goods but turnover is low due to reduced buying power. Prices, except for fuel, have started to normalise.

Relief operation needs to be continued

The Task Force will soon provide an updated situation report giving overall information on what kinds and quantities of food and non-food relief items have been delivered and distributed so far (this list was not yet available at the time of the missions visit). As of 20 December relief stocks available in Gode town were 30.1 tons sorghum, 40 tons biscuits, 9 tons high energy biscuits, 4,000 jerrycans, 41 rolls of plastic sheets, 63 tons of maize seed, 26,000 litres of helicopter fuel, unspecified numbers of tents and blankets, and, for the time being, "sufficient" medical supplies donated by the Government of Italy.

Given the limited means of communication and information dissemination, it is difficult for the Task Force to establish what relief goods and what quantities are currently in the pipeline. The Ogaden Welfare Society reported that from Addis Ababa through Jigjiga a convoy of four trucks was on the way to Gode carrying 35 tons wheat flour and 20 tons Famix (a locally made blended food). Furthermore, the Task Force was urgently awaiting the transfer of 100,000 Birr in cash from Jigjiga to cover operational costs.

Although possibly some more relief items were in the pipeline without the knowledge of the Task Force, relief workers in Gode feel the urgent need of a continuation of relief goods deliveries and an upgrading of the logistic facilities. This is in view of the fact that not only relief needs continue to be addressed, but also that a rehabilitation programme should help those who lost everything, to become self-sufficient again. In the agriculture sector, seeds and farming tools are needed to replant about 40,000 hectares of farmland, while in the health sector, besides a continuation of medical supplies, preventive measures such as spraying to contain the mosquito threat and water purification facilities should be considered.

Logistic needs, as pointed out by the Task Force, include: Heavy machinery to rehabilitate roads and destroyed bridges, a continuation of helicopter support for the time being, 10 to 15 short haul trucks, 5 light vehicles, fuel for these vehicles, communication and office facilities, sufficient cash funds to cover operational costs, personnel replacements and additional field staff - hopefully providing more expertise and including a representative from the Prime Ministers Office and the UN system.

The Task Force, which observed, among many other tragedies, people competing with animals to eat grass and leaves, summarises the current status of relief activities: "What has been accomplished so far is only a drop in the ocean."

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