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East Africa's famine

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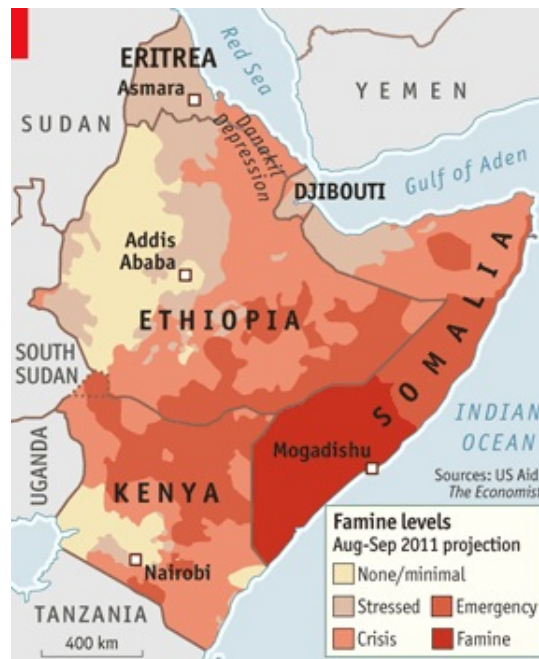
Fighting famine is complicated by old rivalries and alliances

Jul 21st 2011 | NAIROBI | from the print edition

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FOR the first time since the 1980s, the UN has declared a famine in Africa. An exceptionally severe drought is the main cause. More than 10m people are directly affected. The epicentre is in Somalia and Ethiopia—as aid agencies have made abundantly clear in their funding appeals—but the situation in neighbouring Eritrea is almost as desperate and politically much more complicated.

True to form, the Eritrean government is mostly keeping mum on food shortages. Since winning independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a 30-year civil war, the country has changed from a poster child for liberty to Africa's most autocratic and reclusive country. Ethiopian officials claim that almost half of Eritrea's 5.3m inhabitants are in need of food assistance, though that is likely to be an exaggeration. The hungriest bits of the



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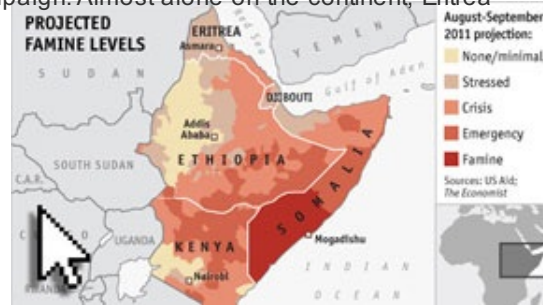
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country are in the Danakil depression, where nothing grows and only small numbers of Afar nomads live. It is the harvest in the highlands that really matters; the Eritrean government insists that people there have enough food.

Farming in the highlands depends on water from small dams that local communities built for themselves as part of an official self-reliance campaign. Almost alone on the continent, Eritrea

turns away foreign aid. That would be fine if President Isaias Afwerki were benign and competent. Reports of human-rights abuses are hard to verify, but a stream of Eritreans fleeing the country bears witness to a thoroughly demoralised people. This month has seen a series of high-profile defections: football players absconding at an away match in Tanzania; medical workers seeking refuge in Sudan; naval ratings escaping to Yemen. Even a senior government propagandist has bolted. The punishment of family members and the occasional execution of failed escapees may only accelerate the flow as it makes the granting of asylum abroad more likely.

Ethiopia has complained that Eritrea maintains ties with rebel groups in the region, including Ethiopian secessionists. Together with other neighbours it has even called for UN sanctions against Eritrea, aimed at the mines. Since independence, Western engineers working for Australian and Canadian minerals companies have found gold, copper and zinc worth billions of dollars in royalties and taxes to Mr Afwerki. Alleged links with the al-Qaeda-like Shabab militia in Somalia are unproven. But Eritrea's ties to its south-eastern neighbour are undeniable —hunger may drive them closer together.



See our [interactive guide to drought and famine in east Africa](#)

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