



Commentary

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# The Human Cost of El Nino in Somalia: A Call to Action for the Government of Somalia



## About the Author

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## Background



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Somalia has been hit by torrential rains blamed on El Niño since early October, resulting in massive floods that have displaced close to half a million people around the country, creating panic among the government and aid agencies on how to save lives and livelihoods. Urgent appeals for help have been issued to the Somali diaspora and the international community to prevent the situation from becoming another humanitarian catastrophe. The head of the Somali Disaster Management Agency Mohamed Mo'alin Abdulle has called the situation “dire”.

Since 1990, Somalia has experienced about 30 weather-related disasters including 12 droughts and 18 floods. In 2006 and 2011, massive flooding in southern Somalia displaced hundreds of thousands of people and prevented the distribution of humanitarian services. In 2018, floods displaced 215,000 people and impacted more than 630,000 others in Hiiraan region. In 2019, high-intensity rainfall in some parts of the country resulted in floods that displaced nearly 500,000 people. In 2020, floods displaced 400,000 people and affected one million others in Beledweyne district.

Despite the World Meteorological Organisation warning that El Niño was 90% likely to occur in the second half of 2023 and naming Somalia as one of the countries likely to be affected, limited government action was taken to mitigate the looming threat, demonstrating the country’s weak capacity for disaster risk management.

## The current situation



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The recent flash floods have killed 42 people, displaced half a million and temporarily affected over 1.17 million others, according to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The majority of those affected are in Southwest, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, and Galmudug. Heavy rains in towns such as Baidoa, Galkayo, Kismayo, Jowhar, and Baardheere have destroyed property, flooded land and claimed lives.

- Southwest state has been hardest hit, with an estimated 400,000 people impacted. Massive rainfall of more than 300 millimeters was recorded in Baidoa over 10 days. Displaced communities were particularly affected, according to the Somali Ministry of Energy and Water Resources. Around 1,077 sanitation facilities have been damaged.
- At least 100,000 people have been displaced in Jubaland. The Baardheere bridge, a vital transportation link between Gedo and other regions, has collapsed which has complicated aid delivery and cut communities off from food supplies.
- In Hirshabelle, 50,000 people in Beledweyne suffered from flash floods downstream, damaging households, infrastructure and food supplies. Seven children have died. Heavy rains in the southern town of Jowhar have also destroyed property and agricultural lands.
- In Galmudug, flooding devastated a shelter for internally displaced persons and knocked out power and internet. One child and two adolescent girls perished in the flood waters.
- Heavy rains and flooding in Puntland have impacted at least 22,200 people, displacing 7,500 people from their homes.



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## Lessons for the government

The government of Somalia needs to take immediate action and prioritize protecting communities and saving lives.

As it stands, millions of Somalis are at risk of not getting timely alerts regarding expected or anticipated disasters, which could lead to the further loss of lives, property, and infrastructure, as well as widespread displacement and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

- The early warning systems must be improved. Preparing for the consequences of increased rainfall, droughts, and temperature changes could save lives and livelihoods. An early warning system is essential for effective mitigation and control of disaster risks, as it would spread information and allow the government to connect more effectively with populations in disaster-prone areas. Community-based flood early warning systems, flood disaster awareness and evacuation and flood monitoring maps would help communities to establish resilience pathways and assist them in managing and resisting climatic shocks.
- The government should also engage donors to establish a flood risk management plan to minimize persistent economic losses and mitigate the effects of flooding. The plan should include setting up evacuation sites and providing tents, especially for those with limited resources. Providing affected and displaced people with clean water should also be part of the plan.
- Consideration should be given to creating awareness, preparedness, and educating the public about El Niño. Information sharing among government institutions and agencies must be improved.
- River embankments and flood control facilities such as dams can be rehabilitated in riverine regions such as Shabelle and Juba, where economies rely on agriculture and livestock. Communities in the riverine regions should also be provided with an awareness program related to the impact of climate change on human lives, water resources, and livestock.
- The impact of El Niño could result in food costs rising, leading to food shortages. Therefore, the government should ensure farming communities receive appropriate support, including financial assistance.
- Floods are known to increase the transmission of water- and vector-borne diseases. Establishing a medical team to assist governments with outbreak preparedness and response is critical. This should be done through proper coordination and communication between relevant institutions.

- Urban sewers and drains should be rehabilitated to lower the risk of flooding and prevent the destruction of properties and roads.
- The government should consider issuing a cautionary message urging citizens to stay indoors during heavy rainfall and storm events.
- Consideration should also be given to enforcing the recently introduced National Electricity Law to protect lives and property from the danger of electricity during thunderstorms and heavy rain.
- The government should take full advantage of the positive aspects of El Niño. Floods can swiftly fill up available water storage facilities, which would increase domestic water supplies as well as improve grazing land, forage, and livestock productivity.
- Local farmers should be supported in developing planting strategies, such as early planting, ahead of projected heavy rains. Increased agricultural productivity would improve food security, particularly in the regions usually afflicted by food shortages.

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