

Terrorists Exit, Allow Famine Relief in Mogadishu



AP Images/Santiago Leon

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) says the number of Somalis arriving in northeastern Kenya continues to grow, with thousands more arriving each week.

The stream of refugees is the most obvious sign of drought conditions in Somalia. Numbers provided by UN show that almost half of Somalia's population, 3.7 million people, is affected by the current crisis. The Horn of Africa famine could claim an entire generation by the time it's over. Worse, al Shabaab—a militant rebel group—was standing in between the starving people and the food brought in by the international community.

Fortunately, according to Bas Vanderzalm with Medical Teams International:

“The terrorist group that was controlling Mogadishu, the capital city, was not allowing other aid agencies to come in and to help. That group now has left the capital city, and we're hoping that as a result some of the aid that was needed will be able to go into the country.”

In fact, Medical Teams International has an open door.

Vanderzalm says, "We've been invited by authorities on both sides of the borders of Somalia and Kenya to establish health clinics there or to strengthen what is already going on."

Vanderzalm says the wave of refugees has overwhelmed the health facilities in those areas: "We are sending in staff and volunteers who are working in these clinics, and providing medical care to hundreds of people every day."

Refugee camps are already overcrowded in Kenya, so Medical Teams International is taking a different approach on their response.

"Part of what we're hoping to do in working along the border in Somalia is actually provide the care and food that people need so that they do not have to take that long trek," Vanderzalm says. "It's much better if we can help them in the places where they are living."

There have been sporadic reports on fighting in and around Mogadishu, and the U.N. special envoy admits the terrorist group remains a threat. So even with the promised respite from al Shabaab, getting teams in still poses a security problem.

Vanderzalm explains that because of

this, "We have to take very strong precautions, in terms of the security of our workers. There is risk involved. We pray for our workers and their safety, but we can't just stand back and do nothing, because there are so many people who are sick and dying, and they need help.

"We have been asked to go into these areas by the local authorities," Vanderzalm continues. "They have assured us that they want us there and they will protect us."

The African Union peacekeepers and government forces are out en masse to protect the teams handling famine relief efforts. Reports from late July indicate they launched a massive offensive to halt an al Shabaab advance.

Even with that assurance, Vanderzalm acknowledges the danger, but says it's even more important that Medical Teams is there.

"God called us to go out into the areas of the world where people don't know Christ and where they are suffering, and then, in His name, share medical care, food and other things," Vanderzalm says. "We trust that God will take what we do and use it to touch hearts and to draw people to Faith in Him."

Somalia has been a difficult field for outreach. Vanderzalm explains:

"We do believe that God is developing and carrying out the work in this

place. This is a strategic moment for us to step forward and to be present there and to show the love of Christ in what we do.”

A cup of cold water doesn’t seem like much help with deadly fighting, disease and starvation. However, it goes a long way to earning people’s trust.

Medical Teams International also provides medicines. This is where the impact of a dollar goes a long way.

“Much of the medicines we get are donated, but still, we have to purchase some of those medicines,” Vanderzalm says. “We figure that for about \$5, we can help one person who’s affected by famine, who comes to us and is sick.”

That’s already an amazing use of the cost of a latte. Vanderzalm says right now, that’s an opportunity doubled: “We currently have a donor who has agreed to match up to \$50,000 in gifts we receive for this crisis. That means that every gift that someone might give to us actually is doubled and could help twice as many people.”

Twice as many people getting aid in the name of Christ equals twice the opportunity. “We’re working in cooperation with Muslim groups in a variety parts of the world, and we find that if we treat people with respect, then they also respect us. It’s an opportunity then to share

our faith in a way that doesn't diminish what others believe,
but
invites them as well to consider this faith that brings people
from such
a distance."