



A famine that's not a famine: counting Somalia's victims



Sally Hayden
in Somalia

Agencies say Somalia is 'on the brink of famine', but evidence suggests the extent of mass starvation is much worse

Abdirahman's mother held him close, though she believed he was already dead. The skeletal 11-month-old boy was unconscious on the long minibus ride to Somali capital Mogadishu, from Janale, in Lower Shabelle – nearly 100km away. Beside them sat the boy's aunt, Siciido Osman Gasim. "When we were bringing him he was not even moving," Gasim recalled later. "My niece couldn't bring him alone because she was so devastated, thinking he was dying."

Now, they were sitting in an intensive care unit in Banadir Hospital, where Abdirahman lay connected to a drip. His mother, who is just 17 and is not being named here, watched over him. "My son is sick," she said, the fear still evident in her face. They had been in hospital for four days, and have no plans to go back home again, even if he is discharged.

The lack of food, lack of water has caused this," Gasim explained, looking at the boy. The family used to farm, but stopped because of the lack of water. Now "everyone is gone, they left the area and became internally displaced", she said. "We have nothing to go back to."

Somalia is experiencing its worst drought in four decades, after the failure of a fifth consecutive rainy season. As animals perish from hunger and thirst, more than 1.1 million people have walked, or travelled long ways in buses, cars, trucks or on donkeys, searching for aid and assistance. Along the route, many die. But the deaths are largely going uncounted.

Gasim said she personally knows of six deaths due to drought: most of them children. "There are people who died because of lack of food and there are people who almost died but were brought here and survived," she said.

Banadir Hospital is one of Somalia's biggest mother and child hospitals. It currently has beds for 40 malnourished children, while work has started on an extension that will fit another 28. But hospital staff say they are at capacity and turning children away. "The situation is overwhelming," said Dr Hafsa Mohamed. "The cases are getting more severe. We're very stressed."

There have been at least 172 deaths in Banadir Hospital so far this year compared to 92 last year, with staff saying more than 90 per cent of children who are admitted survive. And these are the lucky ones: the ones who manage to access treatment.

Deaths, and whether they're being counted, are at the centre of a debate over how incidents of mass starvation are assessed, and what is owed to the people suffering through them. Notably, should what's happening in Somalia be labelled a famine? A famine declaration requires technical requirements to be met, including that at least one-fifth of households are facing extreme food shortages, at least 30 per cent of children have acute malnutrition; and that two people in every 10,000, or four children, are dying every day of hun-

ger-related reasons, including the interaction of malnutrition and disease. But what if that data is not being fully collected?

This year, aid agencies and UN staff have made repeated statements about how Somalia is on the "brink" of famine. "Famine is at the door," said UN humanitarian affairs chief Martin Griffiths in September, during a press conference when a famine declaration was expected by many.

Speaking privately, some aid officials and diplomats question whether the motivation to gather enough evidence has waned because Somalia's government does not want a famine declaration, or whether what is happening across the country right now shows the modern criteria for assessing whether famine exists is fit for purpose at all.

"There's a massive crisis in terms of the data collection," said a humanitarian worker with knowledge of the situation, who did not want to be named for fear of their work being affected. "If we had an adequate approach to data collection it would have already been declared."

One contributing factor is that Islamic burials are carried out as quickly as possible, making it less likely that deaths are officially recorded, the humanitarian worker said. During my last visit to Somalia, in April, several displaced people told me they had buried their children or spouses on the side of the road while travelling to camps. "These people, it's as if they didn't exist," said the humanitarian worker.

The person also worried that while some aid agencies have data on deaths from the hospitals and clinics where they work, they are not providing them to each other, and certainly not pushing the government to accept them. "Why is that data so hard to access and why is it not being shared?" the person asked. "It's as if we have normalised people starving and crying of hunger instead of thinking of it as a national crisis. Human suffering is beyond, I can't even describe it... The number of children who are waiting to die... Why are we accepting this approach in Somalia?"

History

"Abaar" means drought in Somali. The Horn of Africa country of roughly 17 million people has a long history of droughts, but climate scientists say it is one of the most vulnerable countries on earth to climate change, and droughts are becoming more frequent.

Somalia's last famine was declared in 2011, when about a quarter of a million people died: about half of them before the declaration.

Eleven years later, the current drought is said to be the worst in 40 years. Yet it is hard to get accurate data on how broad the suffering is, not least because the country is still at war. Close to one million people are said to still be in places controlled by Islamist militant group Al Shabaab, where they have little or no access to aid.

The latest report from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the international organisation providing the scale used to assess global hunger, says a famine is not taking place. In the report, released on December 13th, it specified that 214,000 Somalis are estimated to be experiencing "catastrophe" levels of food insecurity, which is the same level as famine, but without all technical thresholds being met. Some 1.8 million children are thought to be experiencing acute malnutrition, and 5.6 million people are going through "crisis" levels of food insecurity.

A famine could still take place from next April, the IPC predicts, when the number of people facing "catastrophe" conditions is predicted to rise to 727,000. By then, approximately 8.3 million Somalis will be facing crisis levels of food insecurity, or

worse, it said.

The IPC's latest report was celebrated by some officials connected to the Somali government. They praised this as a marker of the success of the humanitarian and government response to the drought so far, with the UN also saying that famine has been "averted" for now, at least.

Other organisations had a varied, and sometimes quite different, reaction.

"Let us be absolutely clear: famine is already present and killing tens of thousands silently in Somalia," said the Norwegian Refugee Council's Somalia country director, Mohamed Abdi, in a statement. "Lethal hunger has been allowed to spread like wildfire. It is already too late for hundreds of thousands caught in this catastrophe. When Somalia experienced famine in 2011, and more than 250,000 people died, the international community pledged 'never again'. Yet we find ourselves once again facing catastrophe."

Part of the confusion is that assessments around starvation are often filled with prediction, but there is not as much certainty about what is already happening. Aid officials who spoke to me said they worried that, while a famine keeps being forecast, the lack of hard data being collected or presented to the Somali government about the situation so far has given politicians the ability to detach themselves from the reality of how severe the crisis is.

How many have died to date as a result of the drought? Khadija Mohamed Al-Makhzoumi, Somalia's minister for climate change and the environment, said she had no hard figures.

Adan Hassan, the deputy governor for humanitarian affairs for the badly-affected Bay region, said all he knew was that "some" children are dying.

Dini Abdi Noor, the director general for the ministry of humanitarian affairs and disaster management in South West State, one of the worst affected, said he had heard of about 12 children dying in the past three months.

Dr Ahmed Abdi Aden, the deputy commissioner of Somali disaster management agency, said he knew of no deaths at all.

"We averted the famine," Somalia's president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud told Al Jazeera on December 16th, though he admitted that it still might happen. "The reality on the ground right now, the amount of food in the country, the amount of food distributed throughout, there is no immediate famine or crisis or risk right now."

According to the UN's office for the co-ordination of humanitarian affairs, 1,049 children died in nutrition centres in Somalia between January and November this year. A spokesperson said this number included all facilities across the country except for those run by the International Committee of the Red Cross. These figures were dwarfed by admissions figures of more than 1.3 million.

Aid workers who provided mortality figures were very keen to emphasise that severely malnourished children who manage to access medical and nutritional care have a much higher chance of survival than those who don't make it – and the vast majority probably never reach clinics or hospitals.

"If we would be free to move around we would go and count graves, [we would], I don't know if anyone is doing that," said one humanitarian worker.

I took those words to heart, though was severely limited by how many displaced person camps I could access because of time and security issues. In the three where I asked about deaths, I was told in total about 169 children who recently died, and counted 115 graves.

In a camp in the Hanano IDP zone in Baidoa, a city which people displaced by drought have flocked to, I asked members of a local water committee how many peo-



■ Above: Counting recent graves in Baidoa, Somalia. Left: Abdirahman, 11 months old, was taken to Banadir Hospital in Mogadishu by his mother and aunt, who say drought in Somalia means their family has struggled to eat. Below centre (from left): Abshir Issack Abdi, whose two-year-old son Adam died two months ago; and Dr Hafsa Mohamed, who said Mogadishu's Banadir Hospital has no beds left for malnourished children. Bottom: Muslima Madey and Kaatiba Mustafa each lost two children to measles and malnutrition. PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN



Funds

Does it matter whether Somalia's drought is labelled a famine? Aid workers say it would result in a new rush of donations and a renewed sense of urgency. Since 2011, there have only been two famine declarations globally: Somalia in 2011, and South Sudan in 2017.

After repeated attempts to talk to someone involved in the IPC assessments, I finally managed to speak to Daniel Molla, chief Somalia technical adviser at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, in a phone interview yesterday.

He said its methods of gathering data were robust, and that the IPC assessments actually show that the mortality thresholds for the numbers of children dying, which are required for a famine declaration, have been reached among displaced people in Mogadishu and Baidoa.

More than four children were dying per day per 10,000 people, he said (an average of 4.86 a day in Baidoa and 4.19 a day in Mogadishu), but other thresholds had not been met.

"The unfortunate situation that's happening now is that there is too much emphasis on whether there is famine or not," he said. "The level of suffering is beyond imagination, the scale and the severity of the suffering... the level of mortality is unacceptably high."

In interviews, Somali government officials say they are keen to encourage development which may improve the country's resilience during future droughts. Some worry that funding may be diverted towards an emergency response and away from longer-term projects, if there is eventually a famine declaration, or that international investment may be affected, which the new government is heavily pushing for.

Without the declaration, \$1.27 billion (£1.2 billion) was still raised through the UN-organised Somalia 2022 response plan, though officials say another \$995 million (£940 million) is needed. The US government pledged \$1.3 billion (£1.23 billion) this year. Some humanitarian workers complain that the funding has not been distributed quickly enough, or that the vast majority is going through UN organisations, which are known to have particularly large overheads.

Meanwhile, Somalis continue to suffer. In Mogadishu's Banadir Hospital, mothers fanned weak babies, some of whom were barely moving except for their thin chests rising with laboured breaths. Many were being fed nutrients through drips or tubes into their noses.

Farihiya Mayow Muhiyadin (30), was there with her nephew, Ahmed. He is eight months old but weighs just 3.7kg, even after 19 days in hospital.

"His mother was caring for him, but then became mentally distressed after seeing other children dying in the ward," Muhiyadin explained. "She was in shock and was taken back home. She's been gone now for a week."

The family are based about 30km from the city, in a small village in the Afgooye district. "We had a farm and livestock but after the drought came we lost all the cows," Muhiyadin said. "In the previous drought, 12 years ago, we lost cows, but this time we lost more."

Even if they are cured, some of the children discharged from the hospital end up being readmitted, as their parents continue to struggle to feed them, doctors said. Did Muhiyadin have concerns about that? Does she know how they will face the coming months, when the mass starvation of Somalis is expected to get worse? For now, she responded, "we just trust in Allah."



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ple had died from hunger-related causes. They took me to part of their camp, where small mounds marked each newly buried body. I counted 101. These were all children under the age of eight, residents said, and they were buried in the last two months. Two children were buried the previous day, and two more the day before that.

Abshir Issack Abdi's two-year-old son, Adam, was among them. Along with a lack of food, Adam contracted measles, which is particularly dangerous for malnourished children whose immunity is low. "He didn't receive any medication," Abdi said. "There's no health facility so we couldn't take him. There's no means of transport: it would have cost \$5 (€4.72) on a motorbike to get to the hospital, which I couldn't afford."

Before the drought, Abdi said, he owned 10 cows and 50 goats. "They died," he explained, and his means of livelihood was eliminated. Now, "we just survive, there's a time we get enough and a time we don't... We'd prefer to get any basic needs for humans."

At the Edaan Qaboobe IDP site, I asked local leader Isaaq Hassan Mohamed whether there had been deaths. He took me around 20 metres away, to a series of mounds I would not have spotted alone. As in Hanano IDP zone, they were unmarked, except for circles of stones, and situated near the shelters that displaced people are living in.

There were 14 from the last three months, but Mohamed said the owner of the land they are camping on began complaining about burials a while ago, and they had to switch sites. He pointed across the camp to a place where he said there were 35 more recent graves. All were children, dead from hunger and related causes. My security adviser said I could not go there as it was located close to African Union forces, who might perceive our approach as a potential threat.

In a third camp, Tuug Soy, there have been at least 19 deaths in the last few months, residents say. The bodies of the dead were buried in remote sites, camp leader Jafar Aden explained, as "there's no space in the local cemetery", so it was not possible for me to see them.

People were dying because of a lack of aid, he said: there has been none at all for most of the roughly 2,400 people living there.

Among the 19 who died were two of Kaatiba Mustafa's three children. The 25-year-old said her seven-year-old boy died one month before, and her two-year-old girl three weeks later.

"Both had measles as well as severe malnutrition," she said. "The healthcare was not adequate."

Muslima Madey (28), lost two of her four children: an eight-year-old and a one-year-old. "We need to improve food security," she said. "Even the common cold can kill when someone is hungry. Hunger makes children weak. If you are weak any disease can attack you."

WHY SUDAN FEELS BETRAYED BY WEST

Sudan's pro-democracy movement lost hope when the international community failed to help it establish a stable country. But it has found new unity amid the chaos



Sally Hayden

It may not seem like it today, but four years ago there was huge hope on the horizon for Sudan. Sudanese civilians were united as never before, demanding change. Their mass protests succeeded in ousting Omar al-Bashir, a dictator wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity and war crimes, who had ruled Africa's third-largest nation for 30 years.

Now, Sudan's pro-democracy activists accuse the international community of playing a role in derailing the future of their country, leading to the brutal war that broke out on April 15th between Sudan's army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Gen Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is commonly known as Hemedti. To understand why, they say, it is necessary to understand Sudan's history.

For decades, the North African country of roughly 48 million people was a pariah state. Sanctions were imposed in the 1990s, when Sudan was designated by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism. It was cut off from the international banking system, with a host of other repercussions. Civilians said that, though the leadership was responsible, they were the ones who suffered the effects.

Visiting Sudan under Bashir, as I did in 2017, meant being constantly observed and spied upon. Over-enthusiastic officials linked to various security agencies were likely to approach your companions or call by your hotel, demanding information on you. I carried documents everywhere. Visitors, even tourists, could not take photographs in Khartoum's streets without permission from the ministry of information. (In March of this year, I was denied a journalist visa to travel there again.)

At that time, it seemed unimaginable to me that Bashir could be ousted, but it was coming soon.

Civic movement

Dr Sara Ibrahim Abdelgalil explains what happened next: "The civic movement was getting stronger and stronger, especially in 2017, 2018," she recalls, on the phone from the UK. Initially, they worked underground, but hope for change grew. What began as demonstrations over the cost of bread, and other staples, grew into a broader movement for change and democracy.

Abdelgalil became a spokeswoman for the Sudanese Professionals Association, which organised non-violent protests. "There was a united movement, and we were waiting for that for a long time."

She said neighbourhood committees, pro-democracy political parties, trade unions and other groups were strengthened and came together.

By April 2019, "it was very clear that this is like a nationwide movement and that the regime at that time, you know, cannot kill millions".

In early April, a mass sit-in began at the Khartoum compound which housed Sudan's Defence Ministry, intelligence service headquarters and Bashir's residence.

Days later, on April 11th, the once-unthinkable happened: an announcement came from Sudan's security agencies that Bashir had been ousted. Shortly afterwards, generals Burhan and Dagalo were revealed as the head and deputy head of a newly formed Transitional Military Council. But the sit-in continued, with civilians saying they did not want military rule, and that the whole regime must go.

Present was engineer Muzan Alneel. She says the movement was hopeful and optimistic. "When people saw the numbers that came out in 2018, and how the state apparatus or the police were not able to stop them, it was like people discovered their potential."

She says the sit-in, which continued for months, saw Sudanese people "crafting a world in a way that aligns with their values".

There was an air of freedom. "There was a new sense of community. It felt safe to walk those streets even though they are some of the scariest streets in the capital. This is our land, this is our country, we have a right to be here and we have a right to argue back," she remembers feeling.

The day Burhan – "the criminal in chief" – took over was the first time she suspected things were going wrong. Protesters, including Alneel, were encouraged to go home. "All of a sudden it turned into negotiations of powersharing," she recalls. Alneel made a speech that day; it was filmed and went viral online. In it, she said they would not accept an alliance with the generals, and that they would turn against the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a broad alliance of pro-democracy groups, if it did.

Abdelgalil agrees that things started falling apart once Bashir was ousted, with splits emerging among the activists too. "It was like we were all in an aeroplane on a journey. And this journey has been so, so long, and we're just reaching our destination. . . Suddenly there was a diversion. There was a lot of turbulence in this journey. And it was not easy to come together. And then we landed in a different destination."

She says they knew that removing Bashir was not enough. But in the aftermath, Sudanese leaders and the international community pressured the pro-democracy protesters to negotiate with Sudan's military; they gave the impression, "that's enough for you, why do you want more?" she says.



Abdelgalil becomes audibly upset on the call. "I don't want to feel very emotional. But I don't think there [was] respect to the non-violent movement and to the people suffering and that we meant what we were calling for."

"I personally feel betrayed," she says. "I feel so upset and so angry and whenever I remember those who died. . . I withdrew. Because I lost all respect and all trust in different players."

The sit-in was eventually dispersed by RSF fighters, who launched violent attacks early in the morning on June 3rd, 2019, killing at least 120 people. Many activists say the death toll was much higher. There were also widespread reports of rape.

The response was a big failure by the international community, Abdelgalil charges. "The killing of hundreds, throwing them in the Nile, there should have been sanctions," she says. "There was no international investigation. We called for that. That was a big, big crime that was not well handled."

In July 2019, US officials told Foreign Policy magazine that the US had not imposed sanctions in order not to upset the

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People need to be reminded, this is not just violence, it's a post-genocide state. Even if it's belated, justice needs to be served

potential powersharing deal between the military and civilian leaders, which was seen as the best way to move the country forward.

A month later, an agreement was negotiated which would see Sudan's Transitional Military Council and the FFC create an 11-member body to rule the country for the next three years. It was to be led by a military general for the first 21 months, before a civilian took over. Burhan became its chairman, while Abdalla Hamdok, a technocrat with a doctorate in economics, became the civilian prime minister.

Nicholas Coughlan, the first Canadian diplomat posted to Sudan, was following events closely. "I would say the principal mistake made at that point was, when we had a civilian prime minister, it was really, really urgent to get financing in. . . to allow that prime minister to rectify the downward economic spiral that Sudan was in," Coughlan says. That would have helped to marginalise the military, he suggests. Instead, inflation got worse, while damaging US sanctions also remained in place for far too long, in his view. "Hence, Hamdok's credibility started to suffer."

Alneel says the international community continued pushing for compromise between the civilians and the military through workshops, trainings, sponsored trips and other means. She says "closed-door" meetings shouldn't have been happening, but they continued.

Both Alneel and Abdelgalil say they saw the Juba Peace Agreement, which was signed in October 2020, as another point of failure. The deal was signed between Sudan's transitional government and various rebel groups, and supported by the EU and UN, among others. Alneel said it was "rejected by Sudanese people", and "direct



lines" could be drawn between that and the current war. It gave militia leaders "pieces of the cake, seats at the table. . . but so much propaganda, so much money was spent".

"They were always in a hurry," Abdelgalil said about international diplomats. "Were they in a hurry because they just wanted to get rid of the whole situation?" While the protests had put women and young people to the fore, she says they were cut out again (videos showing negotiations around powersharing underlined how few women were involved).

Abdelgalil says the international community was "brushing things under the carpet", while expecting a democratic election to eventually happen. But everything needed to be rebuilt from scratch. Security sector reform was necessary, as was the dismantling of the previous regime, she argued. Pro-democracy groups and political parties needed support because they had spent so long under dictatorship.

'Ignoring red flags'

"It's like having someone who has been in intensive care for a long time. When you leave intensive care, you will need rehabilitation." Instead, she said diplomats and international organisations were "paying attention to deadlines and meetings and ticking boxes" while "ignoring the red flag signs, ignoring the alerts, not listening to the people". She said those who objected were told they were "naive", didn't understand politics or were "troublemaker[s]".

In October 2021, Burhan and Dagalo united to carry out a coup. Prime minister Hamdok was put under house arrest.

"People went directly to the streets" when they heard about it, Alneel recalls. "They built their barricades in similar



ways. . . We were trained in the tactics of protesting." She said there was relief, in a way, that "the battle was clear again".

Confusion and fog around who to trust had been lifted. "The military, they clarified where they stood." She says the coup had been predictable. "Everyone saw signs of it."

But, then, she says, "what the international community did was try to find a way out for the military even after the coup, and that is the worst thing that can be done".

Preparations for the current conflict became increasingly obvious, Alneel continues, as tensions grew between the two generals. "It became predictable with the militarisation of the city. . . There was more military presence from both sides. . . People made jokes and memes about it."

She is speaking from Port Sudan, where she escaped recently after spending weeks under bombardment in Khartoum.

During an interview on CNN International this week, former Horn of Africa envoy for the European Union, Alex Rondos, said: "We need to ask ourselves whether, from very early on, were we in too much of a hurry to find a solution which we thought was pragmatic, but actually tilted towards those who controlled all the money and the weapons – and that the civilians gradually got squeezed out?" "Don't forget, the last two or three years, the world has been otherwise engaged and distracted," he added. "That strategic distraction became an opportunity for real serious mischief which is going to possibly have real strategic implications. This is not just about Sudan."

When asked "how could you let this happen?" Volker Perthes, the UN envoy to Sudan, told Sky News: "We supported where



we could. We facilitated where we could. . . We have no executive mandate and even if some people like to say that the UN has been steering the political process, whether good or not, it's not true. It has been a Sudanese-led and Sudanese-owned process."

He said he understands the "anger and frustration" that Sudanese people feel. "I'm sure we could have done things differently, but I guess that's for a post-conflict 'lessons learned' exercise which definitely will come. For now I think we have to concentrate on getting a ceasefire."

Mukesh Kapila, who was the head of the UN in Sudan from 2003 to 2004, when the genocidal violence in Darfur began, said it was necessary to turn to history to understand the current situation. Darfur has been described as the first genocide of the 21st century. It also involved many of the same actors: the RSF's precursor, the Janjaweed, was on the same side as the Sudanese army.

The death toll was likely in the hundreds of thousands, and violence there has never really stopped, according to analysts, but Kapila, on the phone from Geneva, says there had been no proper mechanism for justice. "It was just kind of put aside. . . People need to be reminded this is not just violence, it's a post-genocide state. . . Even if it's belated, justice needs to be served."

While the Janjaweed used to ride around on horses, Kapila says the modern-day RSF have become "a modern, powerful militia", not least by benefiting from EU funds, which have flooded into Sudan over the last decade, with the aim of stopping migration towards Europe. The RSF were tasked with guarding the border.

Lessons from history

In an email to The Irish Times, an EU Commission spokesperson said: "The EU has never funded the RSF nor the Sudanese Armed Forces [SAF]. EU development programmes have been channelled through the UN family, EU member state agencies and NGOs, focused on the sole and direct benefit of vulnerable populations."

Kapila said "learning the history" would also have shown the international community that a military-civilian transition was not going to work, because it hasn't succeeded in other places. "That was a total strategic error." He said giving the generals "importance and primacy" was clearly a bad idea.

As for what to do now, the pro-democracy activists I spoke to were divided on whether targeted sanctions would have any impact on today's conflict.

"The dilemma is it's very difficult to actually sanction [the generals] now," observes Coughlan. "Because you have nobody to talk to if you do. Number one priority now

is to get a ceasefire. And number two, I would say, is to get humanitarian aid in there. In order to do that you have to talk to these people."

Kapila, the former UN Sudan head, says he believes diplomats and humanitarian workers should not have been evacuated from Sudan so hastily, and that comes from experience. He still regrets being forced to leave Sudan after the violence in Darfur began.

"My position is clear. You do not leave. I come from a medical background and, you know, a doctor never abandons a patient."

He says the impact of the foreign withdrawals, even if there is looting or some deaths among aid workers, is to spread panic and destroy trust. It also makes monitoring what is happening on the ground, and having any deterrent or preventive effect, much more difficult.

Kapila says for diplomats to leave en masse meant they had acted "like lemmings, [actually] this gives lemmings and rats leaving sinking ships a bad name".

In the initial absence of a large humanitarian response by international agencies, many Sudanese pro-democracy activists refocused on co-ordinating assistance. They have been sharing information online and through local committees, which distribute water, food and medicine, or make appeals to help find missing people.

Abdelgalil says the war has forced them to find some "unity" again.

"We just need the response to the humanitarian crisis to be quick. . . a quick response to save lives, that should be the minimum. Leave politics to the side and save the people from the famines, and the bullets, and the health crisis."

Regarding evacuations, she also questions why foreign aeroplanes didn't bring medicine into Sudan, when they came to take their people out. "They know what we need," she says. "[They] just wanted to get [their] nationals safe, and then just went. . . It is very painful."

Alneel says the organised resistance is taking care of many people affected by the conflict, including refugees, the homeless, those who need healthcare, or women who need sanitary products.

"It's a connected network, it's organised," she says. "Helping evacuate people from risky places; providing water sources in places where water is not available any more because RSF or [the Sudanese army] have bombed or otherwise disabled water stations or electricity stations. . . This is the revolution. . . This level of self-governance, that is what we mean by power to the people."

"I am very optimistic," she continues. "What I'm seeing people do for each other is what gives hope. What the international community needs to do, and it will never do, is listen to the Sudanese people."

■ Above: Sudanese and foreigners arrive in Port Sudan as they wait to be evacuated last month. From far left: Canadian diplomat Nicholas Coughlan; pro-democracy activist Muzan Alneel; and Dr Sara Ibrahim Abdelgalil. Below: ousted dictator Omar al-Bashir. MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: SMOVAL ABDALLA/AP





Death in Sierra Leone First the tear gas, then the bullets



Sally Hayden

in Freetown

Civilians say they were protesting against the cost of living. Authorities branded it an insurgency. At least 27 civilians and six police officers died. The civilians' families have been offered money by the state, but no remorse

Twenty-seven coffins lay on the ground. Families of the dead sat hunched in plastic chairs, as a Christian preacher spoke about hell. "If you die in sin, in the hellfire you will go," he said. "It doesn't matter how you die, it matters how you spend eternity. Eternity is forever."

This was the central mortuary in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, on October 17th this year. The 27 people had been killed by police more than two months earlier. Only four family members for each victim were allowed to be present. Security was heavy, with nearby streets blocked by armed soldiers and police.

The victims were to be buried en masse that same day. Their families had begged for permission to take away their bodies and carry out their own funerals, but to no avail.

Inside the mortuary, a uniformed policeman read a prayer: a potentially jarring moment given police responsibility in the deaths of the people lying behind him. Sierra Leone's internal affairs minister then told the families there were buses waiting for them. The coffins were loaded onto the back of trucks, stacked up and visible as they weaved along the road. At the cemetery in eastern Freetown, which has also been used for the burials of Ebola and Covid-19 victims, several family members said they were barred from going near until the coffins were already in the ground.

Most of the dead were killed on August 10th, in what Sierra Leone's government has called a coup and attempted insurgency, and civilians say was a protest against the cost of living. According to official reports, 27 civilians and six police officers died. Revisiting the events of that day, The Irish Times found the death toll is higher than was recorded and that there has been no justice for the dead.

The protest

Many participants said the protest was organised and encouraged by a Sierra Leonean living in Europe, who spreads daily voice messages through WhatsApp. The Irish Times was not successful in contacting him.

But participants said that the eventual demonstration was faceless, and that that man had only put words to their already widespread discontent. Sierra Leone—a former British colony and coastal west African country of more than eight million people—is one of the world's poorest states. This year, it has experienced a fuel crisis and rock-

eting inflation, partially caused by the war in Ukraine, though many citizens accuse the government of corruption and financial mismanagement.

Ten leones in the local currency went from being worth 77 cent in February to 70 cent on August 10th, and 53 cent by November. Last year, the World Bank said that only 23 per cent of Sierra Leoneans have access to electricity, and fuel is used for everything from powering generators to transporting food. But the cost of a litre of petrol has risen from 8.5 leones last year to 21 leones now.

Healthcare workers have gone on strike, complaining about going months without being paid. Dozens of female market traders, who protested in July, were arrested. Under a 1960s public order act, people must acquire permission to protest, and it is regularly not granted.

President Julius Maada Bio, the 58-year-old head of the Sierra Leone's People's Party, came to power in 2018. He also briefly ruled the country in 1996 after leading a coup. Many Sierra Leoneans are unhappy with his position, with some even saying that his past makes them concerned about a shift towards authoritarianism. In the streets on August 10th, protesters chanted: "Maada must go."

The demonstrators were met by security forces shooting first tear gas, then live ammunition. Speaking to The Irish Times the following day, one man said they "were really doing good protesting with [posters]" but the situation took a turn when the tear gas was fired. "That made some people go mad and [they] started throwing stones towards the police and it became violent."

Reuters news agency verified a video that showed police firing live ammunition into crowds. The internet was shut down for two hours at noon, and again overnight. A nationwide 3pm curfew was declared, and police and military convoys patrolled to enforce it.

Vice-president Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh called the protesters "self-serving" and "unscrupulous individuals", saying they "em-

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When the mass burials took place, relatives said they were held back in the cemetery by armed guards and only allowed to see the graves after the coffins had been covered with soil

barked on a violent and unauthorised protest which has led to the loss of lives of innocent Sierra Leoneans, including security personnel".

President Bio took two days to address the nation. "The peace, security and stability of this nation was shattered by persons whose insurrection was premeditated, well-planned, financed and executed with shocking brutality," he said during an 11-minute long televised address.

"This was not a protest against the high cost of living occasioned by the ongoing global economic crisis," he continued. "The chant of the insurrectionists was for a violent overthrow of the democratically elected government."

The reaction from many of those watching was anger and upset. "The president said the people who went on the street were

terrorists—that made me feel more angry," said a relative of a young woman who was killed that day. "I was expecting the president to say sorry and encourage and console [the victims' families], but he really pissed me off."

The families of each dead police officer reportedly received 100 million leones (€5,250) and they were buried on August 24th, in a state funeral attended by President Bio. Families of the murdered civilians had a longer ordeal ahead of them.

'That woman was killed'

The Irish Times interviewed relatives of four civilians killed during the August 10th protests.

We met in or outside small homes across Freetown, some in areas without electricity, where there was open sewage running along the street outside. Interviewees took out laminated photos of the dead, or scrolled through images on their phones. They presented their school grades and sporting certificates. The majority did not want to be named because they are worried about retaliation. "I'll cry until I die," said one relative, wiping away tears as they said it.

One of those killed was 16-year-old Fatmata A Darany. A photo shows her as a beautiful, smiling teenager, posing in a white T-shirt and jeans. She was one of five siblings: "A quiet child, humble, respectful, very serious academically, helpful, loved having fun," a relative said. Fatmata was not part of the protest, but had gone out to search for her mother. She was shot once in the lower belly. A video shows Fatmata lying on the ground in jeans, her T-shirt lifted up to expose the gunshot wound, a crowd around her. "Abuse, abuse, that woman was killed," a woman's voice shouts in the background.

When Fatmata's family discovered that her body was being held in a local hospital the next day, they were informed that the government wouldn't allow it to be released. They were not alone in this.

Musa S Kamara (34), was known in his local area for his love of music and for buying sweets to distribute among the neighbourhood's children. On the day of August 10th, he left home for his irregular job as a driver.

A relative said that while he hadn't participated in the protest, Kamara was "under strain" from the rocketing cost of living. "Things are hard in the country. Transportation is too expensive, fuel too. People want to tell the government it was too much," the relative said.

After the protests started, Kamara's family, back at home, heard the sounds of live bullets and tear gas being fired. "We heard through WhatsApp they were killing people," one said.

Then they got calls from contacts who said they had seen Kamara lying dead on the ground. "They shot him in the foot and then in the side. The bullet came out through his heart," a relative said. "Neighbours went and took his body from the street, [they] took it home, they wanted to take his body to the mosque and prepare to bury him." But a sheikh there advised them to report the death to the police, and the police said the body should be taken to the central mortuary in Freetown. It would be held there for more than two months.

Relatives of three victims to whom The Irish Times spoke said they were asked to attend a postmortem between three weeks and two months after the deaths. Some said they could not bear it as the bodies were so decomposed. "The body was smelling, so long had passed," recalled one.

All said they received no documents confirming the postmortem's findings: those



were kept by the state.

More than two months after the deaths, relatives of the identified victims were invited to a meeting with the government. There, they said no admission of responsibility was made. However, each family was offered 20 million leones (€1,054) in cash which they were told could go towards a memorial service. This is a huge amount of money in Sierra Leone, where the GDP per capita last year was €515, so it was hard to reject. Still, one noted: "The money they gave us was so small compared to life. Nothing compares to life."

"There was no sign of remorse," another attendee said. "I thought the postmortem would enable them to trace the bullets and trace it to the police officer. The officer should apologise to the family. [The state is] the one who gave them the ammunition."

"We need an international investigation because we really need justice."

When the mass burials took place, relatives said they were held back in the cemetery by armed guards and only allowed to see the graves after the coffins had already been covered with soil.

Weeks later, the graves were still being watched over by an armed guard, one of whom told a passer-by that they were guarding against possible exhumations.

"I thought, it's an empty coffin," one relative said, explaining that she had gone to the mortuary but not the cemetery, after she was barred from seeing the body.

'Give us the corpse'

Only one relative said they believe they know the identity of the police officer who killed their loved one. I met Alusine Koroma, the half-brother of victim Hassan Dumbuya, at dusk one evening in Freetown.

He told me that Dumbuya, a 36-year-old "cool guy" who was "very peaceful, calm and respectful" had been active with opposition party All People's Congress (APC). He left behind a wife and a child.

Unlike the others, Dumbuya died days after the main protests, on August 14th, in his home city of Makeni. He had been called from home by a childhood friend, his brother said, and arrived at what appeared to be a set-up. The police turned up within 30 minutes, shooting Dumbuya in the back, he says, though the police said he was killed in a

■ Clockwise from main: Mortuary workers carry coffins of the people killed during the August 10th protests onto trucks; Marcella Sampa-Sesay, the executive director of Campaign for Good Governance; Alusine Koroma, the half-brother of Hassan Dumbuya, who was killed by police in the days after the protests; A poster in remembrance of the six police officers who were killed; There was a heavy security presence ahead of the mass burial of people killed.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN

human rights have gone."

A warning sign

In an office in central Freetown, I met Marcella Sampa-Sesay, the executive director of the Campaign for Good Governance. She was outside the country at the time of the protest, so her first understanding of what was transpiring came through videos posted to social media. "My immediate reaction to the protest was, I was taken aback because of the degree of violence that I saw." She said there was violence on both sides, though she saw no evidence that protesters were armed.

In terms of police brutality, Sierra Leonean police "lack the tact and professionalism to deal with a crowd", Sampa-Sesay said, and "accountability of their actions is basically selective in favour of the regime that is in power."

Even ahead of the protests, she said, "it is very important to note that the political environment was very tense... there has been a massive dwindling of trust. Political tensions between the opposition and the ruling party have been very clear, [both sides] have never agreed on policies and taking positions for national interest."

There have also notably been "high levels of violent speech on social media, especially reported from people in the diaspora... the entire WhatsApp ecosystem is polluted with those messages."

Sierra Leone has a young population facing high levels of unemployment, and they do not feel their grievances are being heard or addressed, meaning "youths became a readily available tool to spur hate and violence", she said.

"For us at the Campaign for Good Governance, we believe in dialogue," she continued. Under the current government, she said, there has been "a lack of consultative spaces to build consensus around national issues impacting on governance and the welfare of citizens". Instead of embarking on "conscious dialogue with certain groups", she said, the government had labelled the opposition terrorists and it had become a "buzzword... deepening the divide and sharpening the mistrust and hate".

Sampa-Sesay said the international community had "a responsibility as moral guarantors" to speak out or take some sort of action. Across the world, there seems to be a democratic backlash, Sampa-Sesay said. Older Sierra Leoneans still remember the devastating civil war which lasted from 1991-2002, during which more than 50,000 people were killed. Two decades after conflict ended, "these issues are a big concern for us", Sampa-Sesay said. "For us, this is a warning sign... The conditions for peace should have been established and if it is not properly established then there is a relapse."

What happens next?

Sierra Leone's next election is scheduled for June next year, and campaigning is ramping up at home and abroad.

On November 21st, Bio addressed the UK's House of Lords, with a speech titled Leadership in Troubled Times: The Sierra Leone Example. He called for investment, while saying the country had come a long way from war "to a place of stability and a firm commitment to democracy, peace and the rule of law". The president quoted Martin Luther King: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." "Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and then the war in Ukraine raising food and fuel prices, Bio said, "we are currently being challenged, tried and tested".

Across Africa, the cost-of-living crisis continues. More protests are likely. What will be the response and what will be the political framing when they happen?