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Subject: FW: Terrorizing Aid to Somalia

FYI – Johnnie flagged this for me.

cdm

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Sent: Tuesday, November 03, 2009 10:12 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: Terrorizing Aid to Somalia

Terrorizing Aid to Somalia

The United States is willfully letting millions of Somalis go hungry in its drive to hunt down terrorists.

BY NATALIE PARKE | OCTOBER 30, 2009

There is a new humanitarian crisis unfolding in Somalia, and the United States is partly to blame. Despite sending \$2 million and 40 tons of arms and ammunition to the country's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) earlier this year, now, the United States is withholding humanitarian aid until relief agencies agree to comply with strict, game-stopping conditions.

The decision to abruptly halt assistance came following suspicions that U.S. aid might be ending up with Somali "terrorists." The main worry is an al Qaeda-linked group called al-Shabab, the leading Islamic militant group fighting against the feeble but internationally backed government. Al-Shabab controls most of south-central Somalia, while the TFG controls only a few areas of the capital, Mogadishu. The south-central region is home to 2.7 million of the 3.63 million Somalis in need of emergency assistance. So, reaching many of Somalia's people with aid would likely entail operating on al-Shabab's turf and interacting with elements of the group to facilitate logistics.

U.S. Treasury Department sanctions strictly prohibit any financial transactions or dealings with al-Shabab and other Somali groups labeled as "terrorists." Yet clearly the concern is not absolute; the U.S. government seems less concerned that the guns and ammo sent as military assistance, intended to prop up the fragile government and keep control of a country brimming with violence, are allegedly being resold on the streets of Mogadishu.

The halt in humanitarian assistance will cripple the work of relief organizations and, as a consequence, hurt their Somali beneficiaries. U.S. officials justifiably fear that they and their partners could be held responsible, even prosecuted, for supporting terrorists if relief funds ended up in the hands of al-Shabab. At first, the U.S. government reviewed the situation and "delayed" funding. Subsequently, Washington issued conditions with which aid agencies must comply to legally operate in Somalia. But the conditions are so restrictive that it would

be virtually impossible for operating agencies to meet them. (To preserve the security of those groups on the ground, specific conditions cannot be stated here.)

The damage is not just temporary. The new, politically charged rules would destroy relief organizations' neutrality in Somalia. Humanitarian aid derives its legitimacy from impartiality -- the notion that aid is provisioned on need alone, rather than politics. In Somalia, where the U.S. government is often viewed unfavorably, political impartiality is a practical consideration as well; it is central to the ability of relief agencies to function safely and effectively. The new U.S. conditions would undermine this core principle by making it nearly impossible for relief agencies to legally operate in al-Shabab-run territory, including many of the most desperate regions of Somalia. The country is already one of the most dangerous for humanitarian workers, so the United States' attempt to bring relief workers under its purview will only increase Somali suspicion toward them and make the environment more precarious.

On top of this policy disaster, money for relief in Somalia is running out. The U.N. World Food Program estimates that its coffers will be empty within the next few weeks. Even if more funds were pledged today, it could require as many as four months for the money to reach beneficiaries on the ground. There will be an inevitable gap in assistance to Somalis.

The timing could not be worse. The country's already catastrophic humanitarian crisis is being compounded by a drought that has struck much of the Horn of Africa. Nearly half the population is estimated to urgently need aid -- some 3.63 million people.

The U.S. government is holding the Somalia relief enterprise and its beneficiaries hostage to its counterterrorism policy. Agencies have resolutely upheld their commitment to humanitarian impartiality and refused to be shut down by unreasonable conditions. Unfortunately, that precludes them from accepting U.S. funds -- normally half of all aid to Somalia. Until Washington lets agencies fulfill their mission unhindered, the U.S. mission to win "hearts and minds" in Somalia, a feared up-and-coming stronghold of terrorism, will be completely undermined. Knowingly allowing millions of people to suffer is no way to win friends.