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Terminology

Chaos, gunfire as starving Somalis attempt to get food

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MOGADISHU, Somalia — A World Food Program (WFP) handout of corn rations to Somalis trying to survive a famine turned deadly Friday after government troops opened fire, killing at least seven people, witnesses said.

Residents of Badbaado, Mogadishu's largest famine refugee camp, accused government soldiers of starting the chaos by trying to steal some of the 290 tons of dry rations that aid workers were trying to distribute. Refugees joined in the scramble, prompting soldiers to fire, the witnesses said.

"They fired on us as if we were their enemy," said refugee Abidyo Geddi. "When people started to take the food, then the gunfire started and everyone was being shot. We cannot stay here much longer. We don't get much food and the rare food they bring causes death and torture."

Related development

Islamist pullout: Islamist forces left many of their bases in the Somali capital of Mogadishu overnight, government and rebel spokesmen said Saturday. The extent of the withdrawal — or what it

means — was not immediately clear. The government hailed it as a victory, but a militia representative called it a tactical withdrawal to enable a counterattack.

The chaos illustrates the dangers of getting help to a nation that has been essentially ungoverned for two decades and is experiencing famine. There are 9,000 African Union soldiers in the capital, but their main mission is to fight al-Qaida-linked Islamists, not safeguard humanitarian aid.

Aid workers are puzzling over how to help the starving without helping gunmen



FARAH ABDI WARSAMEH / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Somali woman takes her makeshift house apart Friday as she prepares to leave Mogadishu's Badbaado camp after government troops opened fire on hungry civilians.

ly but degenerated within hours.
"We got reports of trouble, looting. The trucks were overwhelmed by a mob of people. There were reports of some shots fired," said Orr, who said he could not confirm any death tolls.

One refugee, Muse Sheikh Ali, said soldiers tried to steal food as some refugees began taking it. "Then soldiers opened fire at them, and seven people, including elderly people, were killed on the spot. Then soldiers took the food and people fled from the camp," he said.

"They fired on us as if we were their enemy."

ABIDYO GEDDI
Somali refugee, referring to government troops

who either prey on the refugees, compete for security contracts to guard the food, or steal it and take a share of the profits when it's sold.

The situation echoes the 1992 famine that prompted deployment of a U.S.-led multinational force to safeguard the delivery of food to Somalia's starving. That international intervention

collapsed in 1993 after two U.S. Black Hawk helicopters were shot down and 18 servicemen were killed in a single battle in Mogadishu. U.S. and U.N. officials acknowledge that some aid in Somalia is bound to be stolen during delivery. "What we have to do is try to minimize it," WFP spokesman David Orr said of the loss. Friday's food distribution was organized by Mogadishu's mayor and had been delayed two days as officials tried to shore up security arrangements. Orr said food distribution started smooth-