

July 26, 2011 1:23 am

Send food to Somalia – answer questions later

From Prof Debby Guha-Sapir and Mr Peter Louis Heudtlass.

Sir, The humanitarian intervention in Libya was justified by the UN policy on a “responsibility to protect”, in this case, civilians from the aggression of forces loyal to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The famine in the Horn of Africa surely cannot be treated differently.

The present situation in east Africa is catastrophic and the only response is to send food immediately and ask questions later. But soon enough, questions will be need to be asked – and we have two.

The urgency of the Libya crisis allowed governments to dip into public funds to pay for costly militarised action – to the tune of £2m (\$3.2m) per day for the UK alone. This says nothing of costs such as the launching of 168 Tomahawk cruise missiles within the first four days of this intervention at US\$1m a shot.

In contrast, donors have been shy with their contributions towards the Horn of Africa appeal for funds. The urgent UN appeal asks \$1.87bn to feed about 10m people. Available resources cover less than half this amount and come from leftover funds or from the UN Central Emergency Revolving Fund – a pooled mechanism set up to insure against the risk of overlooking victims of unpopular or forgotten crises.

Faced with a serious shortfall, humanitarian organisations are turning to private donations through personal appeals and helped by disturbing media reports on television.

First, we need an urgent answer to why we can draw on public tax money for humanitarian intervention in Libya, using air strikes to protect people, but need to get non-governmental organisations to solicit private donations from citizens to feed the victims of the famine?

Second, the wrenching famine in this very region in the mid-1980s led to several initiatives to prevent or at least to alert the world to impending famines. Humanitarian organisations also ramped up their capacity to monitor nutritional status in these food-insecure areas.

These initiatives did their job this time. They noted the rapid slide of children into severe malnutrition and sent alerts on an impending food shortage. (“Agencies warn of east Africa famine”, July 6). But not much actually happened.

Some time soon, we need to ask how to connect up aid decision-making and famine alert systems, so response is timely and effective.

Debby Guha-Sapir,

Peter Louis Heudtlass,

World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Disaster Epidemiology,

Louvain School of Public Health,

Brussels, Belgium

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dce0bb0c-b709-11e0-974c-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2011 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.