Donations for East Africa Famine Victims Falling Short

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By: Talea Miller

Scenes of emaciated children and weary families crowded into refugee camps have been playing on televisions around the world for weeks now.

But the famine hitting the Horn of Africa, which has killed more than 29,000 Somali children, has yet to propel the kind of outpouring of private donations seen in some recent disasters, and the U.N.'s humanitarian agency is reporting a shortfall as well. Governments have pledged more than $1 billion for famine relief, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported Monday, but more than $1.4 billion is still needed.

Since charities put out the call for aid for the famine, which was officially declared on July 20, about $23.8 million has been donated to 20 of the top U.S. humanitarian groups working on the crisis -- including the American Red Cross -- linked under InterAction. The group is the largest alliance of international NGOs based in the United States.

"Private donations are particularly important as they offer greater flexibility than many other sources of funding," said Samuel Worthington, InterAction's president in a statement. "The amount of private money donated so far is not adequate to deal with the scale of this humanitarian crisis, but we hope more people are becoming aware of the plight of those suffering in the Horn."

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Una Osili, director of research at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, said the charitable response so far has been more on par with what was seen for the Pakistan floods in the summer of 2010 than the outpouring to Haiti for the earthquake, or even the tsunami in Japan earlier this year.

The tough global economic environment, the lack of a stable government in Somalia and the nature of the crisis itself -- which didn't occur in one dramatic event like an earthquake -- could all be playing a role, she said.

"This is a humanitarian crisis that the scale is unprecedented in terms of the number of families affected," Osili said. "But if you look at the trajectory, it's unfolded over time, gradually."
The Center on Philanthropy found that $228 million was collected for Haiti in the first five days after the earthquake, which was comparable to donations after the Indian Ocean tsunami. The Japan quake and tsunami resulted in close to $100 million in donations after seven days, even though the Japanese government did not call for donations.

The response to the Pakistan floods hadn't even come close to that level by the month mark, raising only $25 million from Americans in four weeks, according to the Center.

Elizabeth Ferris, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said the fact that both Pakistan and Somalia have links with al-Qaida and terrorism likely worked against U.S. fundraising efforts for the floods and the current famine.

"There is a generalized sense that these are countries that haven't been particularly friendly to the U.S. over the years," said Ferris. "I think a lot of Americans still remember Black Hawk Down and the killing of American troops in Somalia."

Private donation levels for the famine have been disappointing, she said, but not entirely surprising given that Somalia is seen as a country that has received a lot of assistance in the past and has struggled with corruption. One of the big questions for donors during any crisis is how their money will be used and if it will reach those in need, said Osili. On Monday, the U.N. World Food Program acknowledged for the first time they are investigating theft of food aid in Somalia.

Educating donors on how exactly groups are working within these conditions to help victims will be key to building the response, Osili said, but time is of the essence.

"We do see from the data that the disasters that garner a lot of response that comes quite early in the first six weeks or so and then tapers off," she said. "So if you don't have a big response right at first, the challenge is how to build momentum."