Humanitarian Crisis in Sool: A Call for Action

By Abdi Omar Bile

July 2023
Executive Summary

1. The humanitarian crisis in Lasanod and other conflict-affected areas in SSC (Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn) is worsening due to insufficient responses from the Federal Government of Somalia and international humanitarian organizations. This is further aggravating the situation and worsening the plight of affected communities.

2. The displaced population in Lasanod is grappling with a severe lack of essential resources, namely food, shelter, healthcare, and protection. This scarcity has emerged due to a broader deficit in crucial necessities required for their well-being and safety.

3. The conflict has also disrupted livelihood mechanisms, leading to the loss of jobs and income for those who relied on commercial activities for their livelihood.

4. The Puntland government has taken a proactive approach to providing humanitarian assistance to the displaced population through collaborative efforts with local communities and several international humanitarian organizations operating in Puntland. However, there is a need for them to intensify their endeavors, particularly in the realm of advocacy, to further support the needs of the affected population.

5. The Federal Government of Somalia and the international humanitarian organizations should organize and provide immediate assistance to the displaced population in Lasanod and other conflict-affected areas in SSC.

6. It is crucial for the international community in collaboration with the local actors to actively foster long-term peace and stability in the region, with the primary goal of safeguarding the safety and security of the people residing in Lasanod and the broader SSC regions.
Introduction

On February 6, 2023, violence erupted in Lasanod town as clashes occurred between Somaliland forces and local forces following weeks of protests sparked after the assassination of Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi, also known as Hadrawi, in late December 2022. Hadrawi, a local businessman, was among more than 120 prominent community members who have been targeted and assassinated by gunmen over the past thirteen years. The root of the tension in Lasanod can be traced back to 2007 when Somaliland forces gained control of the town, resulting in the withdrawal of the Puntland administration's forces. The change in administration and subsequent withdrawal of forces played a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the ongoing tensions and conflicts in Lasanod (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The protests in Lasanod took a dramatic turn when the authorities in Somaliland responded with excessive force, resorting to the use of live ammunition, which tragically resulted in the loss of approximately 15 lives (Raad Peace Institute, 2023), among them children. Subsequently, almost all the respected traditional elders from the Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (SSC) regions gathered in Lasanod in late January with the purpose of discussing the future of the region. However, on the morning of February 6, just as the traditional elders were preparing to announce the outcomes of their weeks-long meeting, Somaliland forces launched an assault on the town. Their objective was to assert control over the town and apprehend the traditional elders. This aggressive action by Somaliland further escalated the already tense atmosphere in the area, leading to a full-blown conflict between the local population, who remained loyal to the traditional elders, and the Somaliland forces.

The fighting resulted in significant humanitarian consequences, including loss of hundreds of lives, injury to thousands, displacement of over 185,000 residents (UNHCR, 2023), disruptions to essential services, and increased instability in the region. According to Amnesty International, the conflict in Lasanod has had significant humanitarian consequences on the people of the town since more than 100 people were killed and over 600 were injured, including dozens of civilians, in fighting between Somaliland forces and SSC-Khatumo forces in Lasanod (Amnesty International, 2023). The Amnesty report also found that the Somaliland forces indiscriminately shelled the town, damaging hospitals, schools, and mosques. Many of those who have been displaced have lost their homes, their means of subsistence, and even loved ones. They now find themselves living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions and face difficulties accessing essential services such as food, water, and healthcare.

Six months into the conflict and the continuous bombardment of the town by the Somaliland forces, the humanitarian assistance provided to the people escaping the conflict in Lasanod has been inadequate. The humanitarian response from the Federal Government of Somalia and the international humanitarian organizations has been lacking. A major contributing factor has been the utter lack of support from Somali federal leadership, which failed to provide even a token response, and has unwilling to appeal for international humanitarian assistance. (a common action in other natural or man-made disasters in the country).
In addition to funding limitations, the sluggish response in delivering aid can be attributed to the political complexities associated with the conflict, which have hindered the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, including delivering food and shelter security, and the provision of any social services for many.

Contrary to the federal authorities in adequate action, the Puntland government has demonstrated proactive engagement by collaborating with local communities to swiftly ensuring that displaced children are enrolled in schools each town, assisting injured ones with an urgent medical care , addressing the immediate shelter needs of displaced families and facilitation of humanitarian aid to reach affected people.

Against this backdrop, SIDRA conducted this study with the aim of examining the humanitarian challenges being faced by the broader population of Lasanod, with a specific focus on those who have been displaced because of the conflict. The study aims to elucidate significant areas of concern and present practical strategies to effectively coordinate substantive humanitarian aid for the civilians affected by the ongoing conflict.

Methodology

In conducting the policy brief analysis on humanitarian crises in Lasanod, qualitative research methods were utilized. The primary objective was to gather insightful and in-depth information regarding the situation on the ground. To achieve this, Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with various individuals directly involved in humanitarian aid efforts in the area, including active humanitarian aid officials, local officials, and community members.

These interviews provided valuable firsthand perspectives and allowed for a deeper understanding of the challenges and needs of the affected population. In addition to the KII, a thorough and comprehensive review of relevant literature was undertaken. This involved examining reports and publications that focused on humanitarian crises, displacement, and conflict in the region. In this sense, the utilization of primary data from key informants and the incorporation of existing knowledge from the literature ensured a holistic approach to understanding the complexities and nuances of the humanitarian situation in the area.

Situational Analysis of the Lasanod

The conflict of Lasanod appears to be protracted and it is almost going on the sixth month causing multitude of humanitarian needs for the affected civilian population. The situation in Lasanod and its surroundings underscores the multitude of needs of the affected civilian population, including basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, healthcare, and protection. It also considers the needs of vulnerable groups such as children, women, elderly, and disabled individuals.

The following sections describe the different challenges and needs of the affected civilian population.

Displacement

The conflict in Lasanod resulted in large-scale displacement as the civilian population fled to nearby towns, villages, regions, and even crossed the border to seek refuge in Ethiopia. The UNHCR estimates that approximately 185,000 civilians fled their homes, marking the largest displacement in the town’s history.
Most of this displacement occurred in February, during the height of the intense clashes between Somaliland forces and the local population. Among those displaced, women, children, the elderly, and impoverished individuals constituted the majority. The indiscriminate shelling and gunfire forced people to abandon their properties, exacerbating an already challenging situation. Those who sought refuge in rural villages faced additional difficulties as these areas lacked essential social services, including healthcare and education.

When violence broke out, every household fled in search of a safe and secure refuge from the intense hostilities in Lasanod and surrounding areas. People’s livelihoods are disintegrated and the overall economic well-being of households crumbled. The displaced households in Lasanod lack urgent and primary requirements such as social welfare, supplementary aid, healthcare, education, sustenance, water supply, food provisions, and all other fundamental necessities for human welfare. a humanitarian worker in Lasanod, Sool.

The outbreak of shelling and gunfire created a sense of panic and terror, prompting a frantic exodus of people who were desperate to secure their safety. Consequently, numerous families were displaced leaving them in a state of disarray as their financial stability was severely compromised. This dire situation particularly affected vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly, who now face a scarcity of vital resources like food, healthcare, water, and other basic amenities necessary for their survival. Moreover, the areas where many of the displaced individuals sought refuge were already grappling with arid conditions due to recent droughts. This compounded the challenges faced by the displaced population, as access to water and agricultural resources became even more limited.

The fighting extended to other areas other than Lasanod. The villages of Dhaban-saar and Samakaab have become the battlegrounds of intense clashes between SSC-Khatumo and Somaliland forces, causing significant challenges for the displaced population in these areas. As a result, these people were compelled to flee their homes and seek refuge in new settlements, where they encountered dire humanitarian conditions.

Furthermore, approximately 60,000 individuals, mostly women and children, who were displaced from Lasanod, sought refuge by crossing the Ethiopian border. The majority of these individuals fled in early February, amidst the initial phases of the intense conflict. They have been temporarily accommodated in over 13 locations within the towns of Bookh, Galhamur, and Danot Woredasiin, situated in the Doolo zone of Ethiopia's Somali region. Despite being located in an exceedingly remote area with minimal humanitarian presence, the local communities in these regions have demonstrated great generosity by welcoming the refugees and sharing whatever resources they possess. However, these displaced people continued to face the challenges as UNHCR notes that it is facing a funding shortfall (UNHCR, 2023).
Displaced People and Movement Map in Lasanod Conflict

Disrupted livelihood mechanisms

The ongoing conflict has significantly disrupted livelihood mechanisms for the affected population. Livelihood refers to the means and activities through which individuals and communities generate income, secure food, and meet their basic needs. The disruption of livelihoods has had severe consequences on the economic well-being and food security of the displaced communities.

Many businesses were forced to close, and trade routes were disrupted. This led to the loss of jobs and income for those who relied on commercial activities for their livelihood. In addition, this conflict has led to an increase in the costs of basic commodities. According to a key informant interviewed in March and April, the cost of basic commodities increased by 10-15% in regions where displaced people settled, such as Taleh, Boocame, Hudun, Kalabayd, and Buhoodle (Inter-Agency, 2023). This increase in cost was due to the closure of markets, and limited access to transportation routes.

Source: Puntland Information Management Center.
The disruption of livelihood mechanisms has significant implications for the overall well-being and resilience of the displaced population. It leads to increased poverty, dependency on humanitarian aid, and limited opportunities for income generation. The loss of livelihoods also has social and psychological consequences, as individuals and communities experience a loss of identity, purpose, and self-sufficiency.

**Disturbed Education**

The conflict has had a detrimental impact on the education system, causing significant disruption and hindrances. Schools have been damaged, destroyed, or repurposed for other uses, making them inaccessible to students. Teachers and educational staff have been displaced or targeted, leading to a shortage of qualified educators. This disruption affected approximately 54,000 students attending 345 learning institutions, including schools, universities, vocational schools, and madrasas (Lasanod-Sool, Lascanood Situation Report Vol 3., 2023). In some distressing cases, deprived of educational opportunities, a number of students have resorted to taking up arms and participating in the conflict, representing an alarming manifestation of early recruitment into child soldiering. This not only jeopardizes their well-being and future prospects but also exacerbates the complexity and gravity of the situation.

**Deteriorated Health Care**

The provision of medical care in Lasanod has been severely affected by the ongoing conflict. The main hospital of Lasanod was hit during indiscriminate fighting, marking the fourth incident in just three weeks (MSF, 2023). The attack resulted in partial damage to the hospital structure and disrupted the functioning of crucial departments, namely the pediatric ward and blood bank.

The repeated targeting of the hospital has had severe consequences for the provision of healthcare in the area. The partial damage to the hospital structure has rendered certain sections inaccessible or unsafe for use. This has directly impacted the capacity to provide medical care to the most vulnerable patients, including children in need of specialized pediatric services and individuals requiring blood transfusions.

Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in the town has had a devastating impact on critical life-saving services, particularly in the healthcare sector. The disruption of infrastructure and the displacement of populations has led to the loss of essential medical facilities and services, including emergency care and specialized treatments. The displaced populations from Lasanod have sought refuge in various villages and towns, scattering across small and remote settlements where access to adequate health services is severely limited or non-existent (Inter-Agency, 2023).

*In conflict zones with increasing casualties of the conflict and continuous indiscriminate bombardment, agencies like doctors without borders establish field hospitals and mobile clinics but this lack of response extends beyond neglect. A scholar from SSC.*
International Community's Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in Lasanod

The Sool region has been a contentious territory for the past decade and a half, causing several United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations in Puntland and Somaliland to refrain from official operations due to pressure from the aforementioned administrations. The disputed status of the region has posed a significant barrier to the delivery of humanitarian aid. These organizations often find themselves trapped in a dilemma between the two administrations, each asserting their legitimate claim over the region.

To provide humanitarian assistance when the Lasanod conflict broke out in February, a discussion was conducted to evaluate the circumstances and determine the best route to use, considering Somaliland and Puntland. Ultimately, Puntland was selected owing to its proximity and lack of obstacles. In mid-February, several international non-governmental organizations and United Nations entities conducted a joint assessment during a period of significant population displacement.

Some humanitarian organizations have extended financial assistance and food items to people who have been forced to be displaced, especially those living in Kalabaydh, Buhodle, Widhwidh, Bocame, and Taleh. Nonetheless, the aid provided was not sufficient to fulfill the needs of displaced people. Moreover, the areas where they moved faced significant challenges. Regrettably, there appears to be a paucity of observable interventions to assist displaced people.

In March, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) pledged to provide emergency sustenance, nutritional support, and healthcare assistance to those displaced by the Lasanod conflict (Somali Dispatch, 2023). However, in early April, UNICEF announced that three fully loaded trucks carrying essential Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and medical supplies had been delivered to Garowe to alleviate the severe shortages of WASH and medical supplies facing displaced communities in towns across the Lasanod District, Sool region. UNICEF thanked USAID for providing these supplies (UNICEF, 2023).

The efforts of aid organizations in Lasanod have indeed encountered numerous challenges that have impeded the effectiveness of their operations. These challenges encompass various aspects, including limited funding availability, conflicting requests for humanitarian assistance, issues related to accessibility, and a lack of comprehensive understanding of the unique circumstances prevailing in Lasanod. These factors collectively contribute to the complexities of delivering aid and hinder the ability of humanitarian agencies to provide comprehensive assistance that caters to the diverse needs of the affected population.
On February 7th, immediately following the eruption of the conflict in Lasanod, the Somali Federal Government (FGS) took a clear position on the matter and released a press statement outlining its stance. The statement emphasized the government’s commitment to protecting the territorial integrity of Somalia and ensuring the safety and well-being of its people. The press statement received a positive response from the people of Lasanod, who perceive themselves as being targeted by the secessionist agenda of Somaliland due to their strong support for the unity and sovereignty of Somalia. In this regard, the FGS provided aid assistance twice to Sool. The first one was in early February when the Somali Disaster Management Agency (SODMA) provided a small number of medical supplies to Lasanod through Garowe. The second instance occurred in March when SODMA provided food aid to Lasanod. It is important to note that the aid provided by the SODMA was the only contribution made by the FGS to the displaced people of Lasanod town (SONNA, 2023).

Despite showed willingness, the FGS has failed to allocate adequate funds to address the urgent humanitarian crisis in the Sool region as it has been lacking initiative in establishing a dedicated committee that would advocate for and provide assistance to the people of Lasanod and making an early formal humanitarian appeal for Lasanod, which would play a crucial role in generating the necessary funding for effective humanitarian assistance for the affected people. However, some respondents believed that the recent visit of prominent traditional elders from the Dhulbahante clan to Mogadishu would create a greater opportunity for the FGS to play in the issue of Sool, But no measurable results yet specifically in the issue of delivering much-needed relief aid to the population affected by the conflict. The meeting between the traditional elders, the president, and the prime minister presents an opportunity for collaboration and coordination between the government and the elders to ensure the effective distribution of aid and support to the affected population. By leveraging this potential, the FGS can contribute significantly to alleviating the suffering of those impacted by the conflict in Lasanod.

Puntland’s Role in the Response to Lasanod’s Humanitarian Crisis

On February 9th, the President of Puntland, Said Abdullahi Deni, appointed a Humanitarian Affairs Committee for Lasanod–Sool comprised of ministers, religious scholars, and businessmen.
The committee quickly acted by organizing fundraising events and meetings with humanitarian organizations. During the first few weeks of March, the committee delivered essential support, including food, to people who had been displaced by the ongoing conflict in specific parts of the Sool region. Although the aid did not fully meet the needs of those affected, it was provided at a crucial moment. The committee has undertaken significant efforts to raise funds, including soliciting donations from various business enterprises in Puntland. Notably, the Golis telecom company contributed $200,000 to support the relief efforts for those displaced due to the Lasanod conflict in early April.

Moreover, it is important to mention that Puntland played a crucial role in appealing for aid agencies to provide essential relief to displaced people, and made efforts to connect the aid agencies to the members of the community in the areas where displaced people reached. Yet, efforts by Puntland to mobilize international support through organizing high level pledging and coordination support of humanitarian assistance were frustrated by low level staff participation and lack of commitment and concern by their principals in other locals.

Role of Lasanod Local Administration in Humanitarian Response

The SSC traditional elders conference established a 33-member committee to administer Lasanod and its surrounding areas in the interim period before formal integration with the Federal Republic of Somalia. The committee has assumed responsibility for governance and maintaining law and order. However, in terms of coordinating humanitarian aid, the 33-committee did not build early rapport with the humanitarian organizations operating in the area, primarily due to their prioritization of political matters and daily administrative tasks over effective aid coordination. As a result, the humanitarian organizations were unable to establish effective coordination with the 33-committee and instead resorted to coordinating with local community representatives at the district or village level.

Recognizing the urgent need to improve coordination with national and international aid agencies, the supreme traditional elders of the SSC jointly selected seven individuals to form an aid coordination committee specifically for the SSC. This committee’s primary responsibility is to closely collaborate with humanitarian partners dedicated to assisting the displaced individuals in Lasanod and the broader SSC regions.

Puntland has not only provided aid, but it has also played a major role in facilitating the delivery of aid by connecting aid agencies with local people, especially community members in SSC regions. Director of Aid Coordination department, Puntland Ministry of Planning.

Furthermore, the Puntland Ministry of Education took a commendable initiative by providing free education to 15,000 students who were adversely affected by the conflict in Lasanod. This invaluable support enabled these students to continue their education and pursue their aspirations, despite the challenges they faced. Among the beneficiaries, 3,000 students had the opportunity to take the Puntland centralized examination. By offering free education to the affected students, Puntland demonstrated its commitment to ensuring access to education for all, even in the midst of crisis. This initiative not only provided immediate relief to the students and their families but also played a vital role in preserving their educational journey and giving them hope for a brighter future.
The committee, therefore, holds the potential to bridge the gap between the local population and humanitarian organizations. This committee is expected to serve as a vital intermediary, conveying the needs and concerns of the people to relevant stakeholders and facilitating dialogue and cooperation among various actors to ensure the effective delivery of humanitarian aid in the SSC regions.

However, concerns have been raised by certain respondents regarding the commitment of international donors to directly engage with the aid coordination committee. These concerns arise from the persistence of agencies not to perceive the current situation of SSC as autonomous region, and lack of effective sound governance structure outside of the traditional elders and the 33 member committee who all consumed by the on-going conflict with the Somaliland forces.

The declaration made by the SSC's supreme traditional elders asserting their independence from Somaliland and declaring no transactions or aid could transit from Somaliland for assisting SSC territories and insisting on their desire to be an integral part of the Somali Federal Government has further complicated the cause of the people of Sool, depriving them of their right to receive direct humanitarian aid without unnecessary intermediaries. The insistence on the consent of intermediary administration (s) creates barriers and delays in delivering essential assistance to the affected population. It is of utmost importance for international donors and agencies to recognize the evolving political dynamics in the region and acknowledge the clear position expressed by the traditional elders of the SSC.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The humanitarian crisis in Lasanod resulting from the ongoing conflict has had devastating consequences for the affected civilian population. The displacement of approximately 185,000 people, including vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly, has created urgent needs for shelter, food, water, health care, education and protection. The disruption of livelihood mechanisms has further exacerbated the economic challenges faced by the displaced communities, leading to increased poverty and dependency on humanitarian aid.

The international community's response to the humanitarian crisis in Lasanod remains slow and in effective due to challenges, including limited funding availability, conflicting requests for assistance and complex political situation. The Somali Federal Government has shown commitment to addressing the crisis in Lasanod, but its response has been limited in terms of allocated funds and establishing dedicated committees to coordinate humanitarian assistance. There is a need for greater initiative and collaboration between the government, traditional elders, and humanitarian organizations to ensure the effective distribution of aid and support to the affected population. Puntland has demonstrated strong commitment to assist and uplift people impacted by the conflict in Lasanod through provision of aid, facilitation of relief operations, and placing displaced children in schooling.
Based on the findings of the study and to ensure an effective humanitarian response to the humanitarian crisis in SSC, the following recommendations can be considered by the different stakeholders:

- **Coordination and Collaboration:** Foster strong coordination and collaboration among humanitarian organizations, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Puntland, and local administration of SSC representing the supreme traditional elders and their appointed representatives to streamline efforts, avoid duplication of services, and maximize utilization of resources.

- **Needs Assessment and Targeting:** Conduct comprehensive and regular needs assessments to identify the specific needs of displaced populations in different areas of SSC. This will help target assistance and prioritize interventions based on the most urgent needs.

- **Provision of Basic Services:** Ensure the provision of essential services such as food, clean water, shelter, healthcare, and sanitation facilities. Maintain a consistent supply chain and distribution mechanism to ensure continuous availability of these services.

- **Education and Livelihoods:** Support educational opportunities for displaced children and provide vocational training and livelihood support for adults. This will help empower individuals and communities, providing them with the skills and resources necessary for self-reliance and long-term stability.

- **Community Engagement and Participation:** Involve affected communities in decision-making processes and program design. Promote the participation of local leaders, women's groups, and youth organizations to ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive and address the specific needs and priorities of the affected populations.

- **Long-term Planning and Transition:** Develop sustainable and long-term strategies that promote the transition from emergency response to early recovery and development. Support initiatives that focus on rebuilding infrastructure, revitalizing local economies, and promoting social cohesion among displaced populations and host communities.

- **Advocacy and Diplomacy:** Engage in advocacy efforts at national and international levels to garner support and resources for the humanitarian response in SSC. Diplomatic initiatives should also play a crucial role in resolving underlying conflicts and addressing the root causes of the conflict in Lasanod or SSC.
References

(2023, May 21). Retrieved from SoDMA: https://twitter.com/SoDMA_Somalia/status/1660301014501670914


Puntland State TV. (2023, April 4). Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=3033698983593728&external_log_id=17b6671e-91ff-406c-9537-b3f0b0975e00&q=Golis%20200%2C%20state%20Tv


SONNA. (2023, March 3). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/SONNALIVE/status/1631741505676140544


About the Author

Abdi Omar Bile is an experienced digital communications specialist and journalist, with over 13 years of expertise. His media career commenced in 2009, where he served as a correspondent in Puntland for Somalitalk.com. Abdi has worked with numerous Somali news websites and co-founded Puntland Mirror, a reputable news website based in Garowe, Puntland Somalia in 2015.

Abdi served as a researcher at Swiss Peace between 2017 and 2019. During this period, he undertook investigations on militant groups in Somalia, namely Al-Shabab and ISIS, as well as Somali politics. In 2020, he assumed the position of communications director at SIDRA Institute. Abdi obtained a Bachelor of Computer Science degree from East Africa University in Garowe and is presently pursuing a Master's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication at Kesmonds International University.

Cover image: Halbeeg Media Inc

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution—Non-Commercial License (CC BY-NC 4.0) Attribute to: Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis