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With a severe drought unfolding across Somalia, al-Shabaab militants have turned to distributing food aid in the country's southern battlegrounds in a new strategy aimed at bringing locals on side.

Two consecutive seasons of poor rainfall has led to livestock deaths and crop failure, forcing people to sell their assets and borrow food and money to survive ([Africanews](#), February 3). An estimated six million people are in need of humanitarian aid in Somalia; following the failed rains that have brought on the drought, there is the growing threat of famine.

As the crisis unfolds, in a rare move, al-Shabaab released images showing its gunmen, AK47s slung on their shoulders, handing out food aid to women and children. The photographs, set in a rural location, appear to show neatly arranged rice sacks and jerrycans of oil. In one of the images, an al-Shabaab flag can be seen. Other photographs show Somalis transporting the items, and in one video, a man is seen thanking al-Shabaab for the aid. The images and video were allegedly taken in Somalia's Lower Shabelle region ([Radioandalus24](#), March 20).

Change in Tactics

The militants claim to have distributed aid in several regions: Bay, Bakol, Mudug, Hiraan and Galguduung. Al-Shabaab has launched drought committees in these regions to coordinate relief, and the group has dug canals to help farmers to access water for irrigation. Reports suggest the group is seeking international recognition for the work and has made public a schedule for further aid distribution ([Tuko](#), March 23). While it is unclear what form the group imagines this recognition would take, al-Shabaab likes to boast that the international media is sympathetically reporting the mujahedeen's distribution efforts in central Somalia ([SomaliMEMO](#), March 28, 2017).

It is unclear where the militants would obtain large amounts of food aid. The group does not grow food for this purpose. Instead, some analysts suggest the aid has been collected as *zakat* (a form of alms giving treated in Islam as a religious obligation) from Muslim businesses in the region. The group also has a network of sponsors who donate money and food. Sources also suggest al-Shabaab may have raided aid agencies supplies, something they have been known to do in the past. There have been reports of such a raid in the city of Baidoa, on March 28, in which heavily armed militants ambushed a Somalia National Army (SNA) convoy and stole food items that were being transported to drought hit areas ([Intelligence Brief](#), March 28).

Regardless of the provenance, if the aid distributions are effective, the move will be a welcome one for locals. The move would be a positive "public relations" exercise, demonstrating something of a "softer side" to Somalis who have in other cases been subject to the group's radical interpretation of sharia that includes amputations for petty crimes, the public flogging of women and the execution of those accused of being traitors or spies. These have made the group extremely unpopular. Al-Shabaab leader Sheikh Ahmed Omar Abu Ubaidah may now be attempting to win back public confidence and support.

Aid Deliveries

Reports of al-Shabaab's food aid deliveries come as the United Nations (UN) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), monitoring developments within the terror group, are considering holding talks with the group. The idea of talks is considered critical in regard to tackling the increasingly dire humanitarian situation; the group still controls large swathes of southern Somalia, areas the international community needs to access if it is to deliver humanitarian aid. The hope is that, in the longer term, al-Shabaab could be persuaded to covert from a terror movement into a political movement ([Daily Nation](#), January 25).

No direct contact in order to initiate talks has yet been made. At the same time, some officials say hardliners may resist the talks, but admit the possibility of a chance of success with more moderate leaders ([Daily Nation](#), January 25).

The group has been here before, however. Shekih Ahmed Godane, the late al-Shabaab emir who was killed in an airstrike in 2014, took the group through a similar phase, attempting to capitalize on relief aid distribution. The strategy failed after the UN accused the militants of blocking aid deliveries, burning some of the items and killing aid workers. Al-Shabaab fighters had also attempted to intercept moving populations with a view to stopping them from reaching Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, where aid was being distributed.

Attacks in Mogadishu

Al-Shabaab's aid deliveries also form part of an altered strategy for the group, brought on by the success of AMISOM troops in forcing the militants out of strategic ports and cities. Instead, al-Shabaab has moved its focus to the control of smaller towns and villages in rural areas.

While some observers view the militant's distribution of food aid as simply propaganda, a wider view is that the tactic is critical for the group because it has been forced to retreat into the rural areas.

With AMISOM troops remaining in towns and ports, al-Shabaab is believed to be re-grouping in these rural areas to launch attacks, coordinated from its base in Jilib ([Standard Digital](#), January 30). Al-Shabaab has already stepped up attacks in the capital Mogadishu and the surrounding areas, putting pressure on the administration of Somalia's new president, Mohammed Abdallah Mohammed (a.k.a. Farmajo).

A car bomb blast at a checkpoint near the presidential palace in Mogadishu killed at least four people on March 21. A suicide bomber rammed a car into the checkpoint, detonating his explosives and killing people in a nearby theater ([Garowe Online](#), March 21). In the previous month, two children were killed and their parents injured in attacks near the palace. Meanwhile, in January, the militant group took responsibility for an attack on Nasa Hablood Hotel in the capital. At least 28 people were killed and more than 20 injured ([News24](#), January 25). A suicide bomber exploded a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device at the entrance of the hotel before gunmen fought their way inside.

Al-Shabaab has made clear that it opposes the new president. In February, [Sheikh Hassan Yakub Ali](#), the al-Shabaab governor for Galmudung region, warned of sustained attacks over the course of Farmajo's four-year term. In a strongly worded speech on an al-Shabaab media, the hardliner described the new president as an American, rather than a Somali patriot. Labelling Farmajo as worse than any other Somalia President, he warned that any individual or clan who collaborated with him would be severely punished (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), April 5; [Kismayo24](#), February 19).

Islamist Threat Remains

Al-Shabaab has launched at least four major attacks on AMISOM bases in Somalia since 2016. On January 25, militants attacked a Kenyan camp in Kulbiyow. Al-Shabaab claimed it killed 68 soldiers, but the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) said only nine soldiers were killed, with 15 others injured ([Standard](#) January 30). The attack came nearly a year after a KDF camp in El Adde was overrun by the militants. Although the government has never released an official death toll for that attack, media reports suggest that more than 100 soldiers were killed.

Al-Shabaab has also suffered major losses. On March 28, the KDF said it killed 31 al-Shabaab militants after raiding bases in Baadahade. The raids were carried out by ground forces and backed by helicopters. The KDF reportedly seized more than 10 AK-47 rifles, four improvised explosive devices, foodstuffs, uniforms, a roll of cables and hundreds rounds of ammunition in the raid ([Daily Nation](#), March 27, 2017).

Al-Shabaab remains dangerously adaptable, retreating into the countryside and promoting its efforts — whether genuine or not — at aid distribution. It also remains stubbornly resistant, continuing to pose a significant threat to ordinary Somalis and the Somali government, as well as further afield.

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