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Half of Somalia food aid diverted: UN report

By Herve Bar (AFP) – Mar 10, 2010

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NAIROBI — Up to half of the food aid intended for needy Somalis is routinely diverted, according to a United Nations report, but the World Food Programme called the allegation "unsubstantiated."

The report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, originally tasked with tracking violations of the arms embargo, was very critical of the UN food agency and condemned a de facto cartel of distributors.

The report -- submitted to the UN Security Council's sanctions committee, with extracts seen by AFP -- said access to WFP contracts should in theory be subject to tender.

But in fact, there has been "little or no scope for genuine competition."

"Preliminary investigations by the Monitoring Group indicate the existence of a de facto cartel, characterised by irregular procedures in the awarding of contracts by the WFP country office, discriminatory practices and preferential treatment," the report said.

The Monitoring Group found that WFP transportation contracts are the single largest source of revenue in Somalia and "just three contractors receive 80 percent of that business", which weighed in at 200 million dollars in 2009.

"For more than 12 years, delivery of WFP food aid has been dominated by three individuals and their family members or close associates," it said.

"These three men have become some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals in Somalia," the group said, adding all three had been mentioned over arms sales and insurgent connections in some of its previous reports.

The UN report pointed out that the vast majority of humanitarian assistance to the troubled Horn of Africa country consists of food aid, most of which is provided by the WFP.

In 2009, it accounted for 60 percent of the total UN assistance budget, or 485 million dollars.

The report explained that because WFP requires that implementing partners themselves certify the delivery of food, they often agree with the transporters and other players to divert the aid and share the proceeds.

"Percentages vary, but sources interviewed by the Monitoring Group describe an approximate division of 30 percent for the implementing partner and local WFP personnel, 10 percent for ground transporter, and five to 10 percent for the armed group in control of the area," it said.

"The remainder of the consignment is distributed to the recipient population," it said, pointing out that transporters themselves admitted "the system offers a variety of opportunities for diversion all along the supply chain."

But the WFP denied the claims.

"The general allegation in the UN Somalia Monitoring Group report that half of WFP food assistance is diverted is unsubstantiated," a WFP official in Nairobi said in a statement.

"WFP also contests the specific allegations detailed in the report describing a number of incidents involving food diversions and awarding of contracts," it added.

Late last month, the Al-Qaeda-inspired insurgent group Shebab, which controls 80 percent of the country, banned the WFP from operating in Somalia.

In January, the food agency had announced the suspension of its operations in southern Somalia, citing months of attacks and extortion by insurgents.

"Despite dangerous operating conditions, WFP has sought to follow all rules and regulations surrounding our operations," WFP Deputy Executive Director Amir Abdulla said earlier in a statement.

In its report, the UN Monitoring Group also alleged that systematic collusion between transporters, implementing partners and armed groups had spawned very large para-military outfits.

"The provision of food aid has thus become a militarised business, with businessmen maintaining their own militias in order to protect their warehouses, convoys and distribution points," the document said.

"Not surprisingly, WFP contractors have maintained some of the largest private militias in southern Somalia," it added.

US officials have repeatedly voiced concerns that US and other foreign aid to Somalia was being diverted and falling into the hands of the Shebab, a group listed as a terrorist organisation by Washington.

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Photo 1 of 2



An internally displaced Somali girl receives some food aid in Mogadishu, in 2009



Map



