

A mother looks at her daughter, who is suffering from severe acute malnutrition, at a stabilization center in a hospital in Qardho, Puntland, Somalia, April 17, 2026. (AP/Jack Denton)

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Somalia is once again approaching the brink of catastrophe, agencies warn as the country is facing one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises.

International aid agencies, including those connected to the Catholic Church, warn that millions lack access to basic, life-saving services and urgently need sustained global support.

"Nearly 6.5 million people across Somalia are experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity, while more than 1.8 million children are suffering from acute malnutrition," a group of aid organizations, including Save the Children International and SOS Children's Villages International, said in a joint May 20 statement. "Among them, hundreds of thousands face severe acute malnutrition requiring urgent treatment."

These are not simply numbers, the organizations said, "they represent children going to bed hungry, families forced from their homes by repeated drought and conflict, and mothers struggling to make impossible trade-offs to keep their children alive."

The numbers correspond with the latest April-June data from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification initiative — a standardized global framework used to classify, measure and communicate the magnitude of food insecurity and malnutrition.

Bishop Jamal Boulos Sleiman Daibes of Djibouti, who is also the apostolic administrator of Mogadishu, is calling for continued international attention and solidarity, pointing to the country's fragile and complex humanitarian reality.

"The humanitarian situation is indeed very serious," Daibes told OSV News, noting that the scale of the crisis is vast, driven by recurrent drought, displacement, food insecurity and climate shocks, while available resources remain insufficient. "For this reason, continued international solidarity and support remain essential."

Millions of people are without essential services such as health care and clean water, even as the church — through Caritas Somalia and in collaboration with humanitarian organizations and international partners — continues to respond.

"One can also observe the resilience and dignity of the Somali people, as well as ongoing efforts by local authorities and international partners to strengthen stability and promote recovery," said the bishop. "Nevertheless, the humanitarian needs remain immense and require sustained international attention and solidarity."

In a statement issued in late March, Caritas Somalia said that "women, children and the elderly, already hit, are bearing the brunt of this worsening crisis," and warned that 11% of the needed donor funds had been received. "We call on donors to mobilize urgently needed funding to provide life-saving service to the most vulnerable, especially women and children," Caritas said.

Aid leaders say the crisis is deepening as economic pressures compound humanitarian needs.

Mohammed Abdi, Somalia country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said the country is absorbing a major economic shock alongside widespread hunger, with fuel prices rising by as much as 150% and basic food staples increasing by 50% since the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

"Only 15% of the humanitarian response is funded. We are watching this deteriorate in real time, while the resources to stop it are not there," said Abdi.

The situation in Somalia was already tenuous when the Trump administration shuttered the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2025, and the Iran war added to challenges of aid organizations.

"Somalia is heavily dependent on imports for food, fertilizer and fuel. With shipping effectively halted in the Strait of Hormuz, prices for those critical goods have roughly doubled. In scores of poor and unstable countries, hunger is increasing as the cost of food rises," The New York Times reported, adding: "We're seeing the first real test of how a global shock like the war will play out in what one relief official described as 'the post-aid era.'"

"In more than three decades of journalism, I have seen my share of tragedies, from the Indian Ocean tsunami to wars in Iraq and Cambodia. But what I saw and heard recently in Somalia shocked me," Peter Goodman reported for the NYT.

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Somalia's prolonged instability further complicates relief efforts. The country continues to face an insurgency by al-Shabab, an al-Qaida-affiliated group in East Africa, which has carried out attacks and enforces a strict interpretation of Islamic law in areas under its control.

Despite these challenges, the Catholic Church maintains a discreet but meaningful presence. Somalia is overwhelmingly Muslim (99.9%), and Christian communities are small and largely concentrated in urban areas, often consisting of converts. Much of the Church's physical infrastructure has been destroyed; the main cathedral in Mogadishu, built between 1925 and 1928 by Consolata missionaries, has been in ruins since 2008 and its grounds have been used as a settlement for people displaced by decades of conflict.

Daibes said his ministry is carried out with prudence and discretion, but remains closely connected to the people through humanitarian outreach and collaboration.

"Although direct presence in the country is not always possible, I remain in regular contact with the reality of Somalia, especially through Caritas Somalia, which represents the social and humanitarian service of the church," he said.

He added that the church's presence is necessarily limited and respectful of local conditions, with ongoing contact maintained with clergy in Somaliland -- a self-declared independent region in the north -- and chaplains in Mogadishu.

"The church's mission is carried out primarily through witness, humanitarian service, accompaniment, and the promotion of dialogue and human fraternity," said Daibes.

Despite the scale of suffering, the bishop expressed cautious hope for Somalia's future, pointing to the importance of reconciliation, institution-building and investment in young people.

"Building lasting peace requires not only security measures, but also investment in opportunities for young people, social development, and the strengthening of trust and cooperation within society," he said.