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See highlight:

WP: U.S. to ease anti-terror rules to help hungry Somalis

By Mary Beth Sheridan
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The Obama administration is moving toward easing anti-terrorism restrictions in Somalia that have hampered delivery of urgently needed aid to famine-stricken parts of the country, officials said Monday.

The shift reflects the administration's alarm about the drought in East Africa, the region's worst in two decades. About 2.2 million of the 3.7 million people affected by famine live in parts of southern Somalia ruled by al-Shabab, an Islamist extremist group linked to al-Qaeda.

Under current restrictions, U.S.-funded groups could face prosecution if they pay "taxes" or tolls demanded by al-Shabab on food shipments. Humanitarian groups say that has only added to the severe difficulties of working in southern Somalia, where al-Shabab has killed and threatened Western aid workers.

"What needs to happen is all actors on the ground – insurgents, the U.S. government and donors – need to lift any restrictions" on providing aid, said Shannon Scribner, humanitarian policy manager at the relief agency Oxfam.

The situation has posed a dilemma for the Obama administration. According to experts on Somalia, if the regulations are relaxed, it is inevitable that some aid will be siphoned off by al-Shabab.

But with thousands of villagers, many of them children, having died of hunger – and with scores streaming across the border to crowded refu-gee camps in Kenya and Ethi-o-pia- – the need to lift restrictions may be more pressing.

"The question is, can we live with some diversion of aid to stop the famine?" said Ken Menkhaus, a Davidson College professor and expert on Somalia.

"The fear on the part of the Obama administration is of being put in a position, by opponents, of channeling food aid to terrorists," Menkhaus said. But he said al-Shabab gets most of its revenue from other sources – such as charcoal smuggling.

A senior administration official, who was not authorized to comment on the record, said the U.S. concerns are legitimate.

Aid workers "need to be able to operate in a way the benefits go to the vulnerable citizens in the country and not to al-Shabab," he said.

Several officials said that there has been no major disagreement within the administration about providing expanded licenses to aid groups to work in areas controlled by al-Shabab but that it has taken time to hammer out the details. U.S. officials say they want to ensure that as little aid as possible is diverted.

Among those supporting the change is John O. Brennan, the White House's counterterrorism chief, the officials said.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has been working intensively on the issue, according to aides. She "has tried to do everything possible to ensure that no one . . . will be penalized for food shipments inadvertently falling into the hands of al-Shabab," said a State Department official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Al-Shabab is the greatest barrier to aid reaching famine-plagued villages, according to officials and Somalia experts.

The group announced last month that it would allow in Western aid organizations it had kicked out a year earlier. But within weeks, al-Shabab reversed its decision.

Scores of aid workers have been killed in the past few years in areas controlled by al-Shabab. In January 2010, the World Food Program, which was the main conduit for U.S. food aid, pulled out of southern Somalia because of the hazards.

"Our biggest challenge is getting access to al-Shabab areas, not U.S. restrictions," said Allan Jury, director of the WFP's U.S. office, speaking on a panel Monday at the Brookings Institution.

U.S. aid to Somalia has plummeted in the past few years, from \$237.4 million in 2008 to about \$28 million last year, according to a September 2010 report by the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The United States, however, remains the biggest bilateral donor of humanitarian assistance to the Horn of Africa, giving more than \$450 million this year. And officials are scrambling to find more resources.

No one expects that a U.S. policy change on the anti-terrorism restrictions will end the famine. But aid organizations say that, without the threat of U.S. punishment, their employees will be able to work more easily with their Somali networks to get food into hard-hit areas.

"This is an instance where a lot of lives really could be saved if we could get aid flowing to the south," said Jeremy Konyndyk, policy director for Mercy Corps.

Valerie Amos, the U.N. emergency relief coordinator, warned Monday that the food emergency could soon expand beyond the two regions of Somalia where the United Nations formally declared famine last month. "Unless we see a massive increase in the response, the famine will spread to five or six more regions," she said.

Evan Kohlmann, a terrorism expert with Flashpoint Global Partners, said there was a risk that the U.S. policy shift could backfire.

"You're giving Shabab a leg up by allowing them to claim this aid is coming from them," he said.

Menkhaus said, however, that the most influential people in Somalia – businessmen and other elites – would know that the aid was coming from the West.

"I don't think it's going to help them [al-Shabab] that much," he said. "But it will definitely help us. It will show Somalis that we're doing all we can to try to support them in this crisis."