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By Hilary Matfess

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In this file photo taken Saturday, Aug. 27, 2016, women displaced by Islamist extremists wait for food to be handed out to them at the Bakassi camp in Maiduguri, Nigeria. (Source: AP Photo/Sunday Alamba,File.)

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By Alexander Noyes

On December 2, 2016, Yahya Jammeh, the president of The Gambia for the last 22 years, [conceded](#) defeat in a surprise electoral win by opposition candidate Adama Barrow. The electoral turnover marks The Gambia's first democratic transfer of power. Jammeh came to power through a military coup in 1994 and led the country in an increasingly authoritarian and mercurial fashion since then, proclaiming in 2011 that he would rule for "a [billion](#) years." Barrow, who led a coalition of opposition parties, [won](#) 45 percent of the vote, with Jammeh gaining 36 percent. While some [reports](#) indicate that Jammeh may not leave the political scene so easily, the election result and Jammeh's concession have been hailed regionally and internationally as an unexpected success story for democracy in Africa. [more...](#)



Gambian President-elect Adama Barrow sits for an interview with the Associated Press at his residence in Yundum, Gambia, Saturday Dec. 3, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/Jerome Delay.)

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Near-Term Issues: Displacement and Food Shortages in the Region

The displacement crisis in the Lake Chad Basin is perhaps the most obvious of the challenges facing the region. [An estimated 2.6 million](#) people have been displaced as a result of Boko Haram's violence. According to the International Rescue Committee, it "[is Africa's fastest growing crisis](#)," affecting an estimated 21 million people in some way. Many of the displaced have taken shelter in Maiduguri, the capital of the beleaguered Borno State. Dr. Bulama Gubio, a member of the Borno Elders' Forum and a resident in the city, estimates that the population has doubled in size since the crisis accelerated in 2009. The strain on the city's infrastructure is evident. Schools were, [until recently](#), unable to focus on students' needs because they were serving as makeshift displacement camps.

The government and international humanitarian groups have struggled to keep pace with the rapid acceleration in displacement and the pressing needs of the displaced. [More than 90 percent](#) of the displaced are living with hosts in the community, rather than in formal camps. Although this alleviates the burden on the government, which does not provide medical care, education services, or food assistance to those who are not in formal camps, it places an additional strain on the city's residents. The increased demand for housing, as internally displaced people (IDPs) and aid workers alike have made their way to the city, has sent prices skyrocketing—Al Jazeera reports that prices have [doubled](#) as a result of the influx. Many of the displaced were farmers. In Maiduguri, however, few have access to land, limiting their ability to support themselves. The region is suffering from a crippling food crisis, in large part due to the collapse of farming throughout the region.

Estimates from the World Food Program suggest that in Borno State alone, there are more than [3 million people](#) who are experiencing "moderate and severe food insecurity." In mid-November, the UN warned that [75,000 children](#) are at risk of death from starvation and malnutrition "in a few months" without support.

Toby Lanzer, the UN assistant secretary general and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s regional humanitarian coordinator for the Sahel, [expressed the gravity of the situation](#): "This is about as bad

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as it gets. There's only one step worse and I've not come across that situation in 20 years of doing this work and that's a famine." As of July, only [\\$75 million](#) of the UN's requested \$279 million had been secured. This shortfall reflects a history of underinvestment in the region. Although the humanitarian crisis has captured the attention of the [press](#), it has not necessarily attracted sufficient attention from policymakers around the world.

Even though this food crisis can be traced to Boko Haram's destruction and the military operations against the insurgents, long-standing characteristics of the region make it prone to food insecurity. Some of the vulnerability of the region's food security can be traced to "a lack of investment in rural [development](#)" by regional governments. In addition, even before the Boko Haram crisis, many were concerned about the effects of climate change and population growth on the Lake Chad Basin. As the World Food Program notes, "Lake Chad is a [dynamic](#) body of water, constantly changing size, shape and depth, in response to even slight fluctuations in annual precipitation," making it difficult to project the relative health of the lake and its ecosystem. The lake itself not only provides water to millions and enables the region's agricultural productivity, but is crucial for the fishing economies of the countries that border it. The lack of protection and investment in the Lake Chad Basin results in "poor infrastructure and social protection . . . which, in turn, undermines livelihoods [and food security](#)."

A Long-Term Issue: Securing the Region

Providing nutritional support and emergency food assistance to those in need in the Lake Chad Basin is the most pressing humanitarian issue in the near term. One obstacle is that the Nigerian authorities view the humanitarian crisis as a short-term issue. The government of Borno State has expressed its intention to close the IDP camps in the state by [May 2017](#), a timeline that seems difficult to meet. IDPs and returnees complain of a lack of physical security (from both landmines and continued incursions by Boko Haram) and inadequate government support to rebuild and resettle their communities. Father Maurice Kwairanga, whose cathedral serves as a shelter for displaced people in Adamawa State, [explained the problem](#): "Many places are still not as secure as the media or the military say they are. Close to the highways it may be OK, but not in the more isolated rural communities where there is [no security cover](#). Some people from here did go back home, but they were then attacked and came back here to the cathedral."

Short-term priorities, such as kinetic operations against Boko Haram, should be pursued in combination with longer-term planning focused on securing the region. As the World Food Program observed, "while crucial to treat immediate hunger and strife within the region, the [Band-Aid](#) emergency relief neglects to address development problems underpinning the protracted humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin." Building more resilient rural communities and agricultural systems could be a part of the resettlement objectives.

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Jammeh's Brutal Rule

The Gambia, located in West Africa, is the smallest country in mainland Africa, with a population of just under 2 million. In 2015, Jammeh [declared](#) the country an Islamic republic. With the country previously [known](#) as the "smiling coast of West Africa," Jammeh ruled The Gambia for the previous two decades in a brutal and erratic manner. He faced sharp [criticism](#) from international and human rights groups for widespread human rights violations, including torture and extrajudicial killings. Indeed, critics have [referred](#) to Jammeh's rule as, "the worst dictatorship you've probably never heard of." International actors also took notice, with the United States removing the country from eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act in 2015 and the European Union (EU) [suspending](#) aid to The Gambia in 2014 over a severe anti-homosexual law. As highlighted in the January 15, 2015, [edition](#) of *Africa Watch*, Jammeh has faced a number of alleged attempts to overthrow him. After the most recent coup attempt was put down, in December 2014, Jammeh purged the military and cracked down on opposition groups.

2016 Election Surprise

Given Jammeh's harsh 22 years in power, his loss and acceptance of defeat was unexpected, both in the region and abroad. Building on momentum [generated](#) by anti-government protests in April and May of this year—in which nearly 50 were arrested, including senior opposition figures—eight opposition groups formed a united coalition to oppose Jammeh. But Jammeh's [refusal](#) to allow EU election monitors in the country and his [decision](#) to cut off all access to the Internet and international phone service appeared to suggest that Jammeh would again do whatever it took to remain in power. When the election results were announced, however, Jammeh called Barrow to concede defeat, shocking many. With television cameras rolling, Jammeh [told](#) Barrow: "Allah is telling me my time is up and I hand over graciously with gratitude toward the Gambian people and gratitude toward you." Barrow, a former businessman and real estate mogul, appeared just as surprised by Jammeh's concession and his own victory as many observers, [saying](#), "I'm very happy because everybody thought that it was impossible, and the impossible became possible." Alieu Momar Njie, the head of The Gambia's electoral commission, also expressed surprise, [noting](#), "It's really unique that someone who has been ruling this country for so long has accepted defeat."

Barrow's victory spurred large celebrations in Banjul, the capital, with thousands taking to the streets. In a marked departure from the past, security [forces](#) looked on and did not intervene, as demonstrators pulled down posters of Jammeh. Barrow has promised to [reverse](#) many of Jammeh's most controversial policies, pledging to return The Gambia to the Commonwealth and not to pull out of the International Criminal Court, which Jammeh had promised to do. Barrow also pledged to undertake significant security sector reforms, [saying](#), "We will improve their [security forces] training to give them the professionalism to do their job With our government, they will be distanced from politics." Members of Barrow's coalition have also suggested they will [prosecute](#)

Jammeh for past crimes, which could complicate a smooth transition process. International actors have welcomed the election results and Jammeh's concession, with Secretary of State John Kerry [congratulating](#) Barrow for "his historic victory, which will mark the first democratic transfer of power in the country, and we look forward to working with him as he helps to usher in a new era in The Gambia." Ties with Western countries and the United States look set to deepen under Barrow.

Conclusion

Although [fears](#) persist that Jammeh may attempt to scuttle the coming transfer of power, the unexpected election results in The Gambia highlight the importance of opposition unity to democratization in semi-authoritarian countries, in both Africa and beyond. Indeed, academic [research](#) highlights that opposition unity is key to political liberalization in non-democracies. Marc Morje Howard and Philip G. Roessler, for instance, [find](#) that the opposition's "decision to create a coalition or to jointly support a single candidate, despite significant regional, ethnic, or ideological differences and divisions—can have a tremendous effect on the electoral process and its results." The Gambia, as well as the recent case of [Nigeria](#) in 2015, lend further support to these findings.

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