

Africans pour anger, sadness onto Twitter over famine

REUTERS, Nairobi

Thousands of Africans are taking to Twitter to vent grief and anger over another famine in Somalia, raising money and comforting each other -- a stark illustration of a continent embracing a digital future but lamenting timeworn failings.

When news began to break that what was now referred to as "the F-word" was now official in parts of the war-racked Horn of Africa country, the social networking site Twitter lit up.

By mid-Friday, some Twitter statistics websites said that twenty tweets a minute were about the famine and a growing number were from Africans who previously had not engaged in such widespread pan-continental debates using what is still relatively new technology.

Debates that had raged through weeks of drought gained momentum when the famine was declared Wednesday and many were angry things had deteriorated so much.

"The emergency in the Horn of Africa should be attributed to respective governments and al Shabaab (Somalia's Islamist rebels) not the lack of rain," wrote a Twitter account called Conflict Media.

Somalis, Ethiopians and Kenyans did not hold back from attacking their governments for failing to prepare for a predictable drought and for reacting slowly when it became clear some 10 million people were going hungry in the three countries.

"It's just depressing that it's a pattern and EVERY time we're *surprised* the drought is here!" wrote Leyou from Ethiopia.

Though Twitter penetration in Africa is still much lower than other parts of the world, it is growing fast as technology improves, mobile networks spread and thousands are now accessing the Internet on their phones.

Many Africans on Twitter recognized the contrast between themselves -- normally middle class professionals -- and the people who have spent days trekking across parched deserts, under attack from hyenas and bandits, looking for food.

Some professing themselves guilty for having so much in contrast to those in the refugee camps, Africa's tweeters and Africans living in the West used Twitter to organize small fundraising events and to tell confused Westerners to what charities they should donate.

"Donate the cost of a fast food meal. Help somebody in need," wrote Dilaun White, linking to a website that outlined different options for people who wanted to give money.

The Africans on the network often use it to complain about negative portrayals of the continent that they say Westerners sometimes perpetuate, and to publicize their fast-growing economies, mushrooming industries and emerging middle classes



REUTERS

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"With such abounding beauty, why the negative Africa images?" asked a Twitter account called All Africa, though other users felt the often shocking and disturbing images were needed to raise cash to feed the hungry.

At times their anger was scattershot, directed at "corrupt" governments, "interfering" foreign charities and the international media who tweeters said only show up when there were dying children to film. "Say no to human interest stories," wrote Twitter user Anddiswa, who told Reuters she cried as she watched foreign reporters interview a woman

at a refugee camp.

"The only thing she had left was her dignity and they took it for that sensationalist effect," Anddiswa said, reflecting a view held by many Africans on Twitter.

For them, the foreign media and international funding always arrive too late because prevention doesn't make such a splash as footage of emaciated children and stories of "haunted" adults.

The shortfall in cash to respond to the crisis fuelled many of the complaints, with richer African nations such as Nigeria and South Africa singled out for criticism.

"The 'African solution' in Libya is to do nothing. The same with the drought. It's called non-interference!" wrote Ugandan lawyer David Mpanga from Kampala.

Africans used the social networking site to comfort each other, too, pouring out raw emotion as the story unfolded, many tweeting to each other that they were weeping.

They shared stories of fathers killing themselves rather than watching their children die, women arriving at refugee camps carrying dead babies, and one man who cut open his stomach.

"Oh God, please have mercy on those facing famine!" wrote Salha L Kaitesi.

Somali rapper K'naan -- whose anthem of African unity, "Wavin' Flag," was often played at South Africa's World Cup last year -- perhaps best summed up the span of emotional contradictions many Africans are going through this week.

"I love you but you're killing me, Somalia," he wrote on Twitter. "Killing me."

Fake Apple store cuts to core of China risk to brands

REUTERS, Shanghai

A fake Apple store in China, made famous by a blog that said even the staff working there didn't realise it was a bogus outlet, is probably the most audacious example to date of the risks Western companies face in the booming Chinese market.

Few products have captured the imagination of Chinese consumers quite like Apple's iPhones and iPads. Demand is surging across the country of 1.3 billion people, even hundreds of miles away from the tech giant's official stores in Beijing and Shanghai.

That marks a huge opportunity for Apple to sell its iconic products, but it also leaves the most valuable brand name in the world vulnerable to the sort of scam perpetrated by the fake store in Kunming, in southwestern Yunnan province.

Complete with the white Apple logo, wooden tables and cheery staff characteristic of real Apple stores worldwide, the Kunming copy left even regular industry watchers startled at the elaborate fake.

"I'm not aware that there have been actual fake stores like that before," said Bob Poole, vice president of the China operations of the U.S.-China Business Council in Beijing.

"If your products are being sold as fakes, then your reputation goes down and people are going to be less willing to buy. We have to maintain active vigilance."

Apple has authorised close to a thousand resellers in China to sell its goods. They are required to comply with certain standards and rules on store layout and customer service to get the rights to sell such items as Apple's iPhones and iPad tablet computers.

The Cupertino, California-based company, which global brands agency Millward Brown says has the world's most valuable brand worth some \$153 billion, has just four official stores in China, two of them in Beijing and two in Shanghai.

In spite of the number of resell outlets, many more copycats have popped

up. They often sell real Apple products, obtained from illicit channels, such as smuggling, or through the grey market via Apple agents and distributors.

The blogger who made the store an overnight online sensation said the Kunming store was a "beautiful rip-off" and the salespeople "all genuinely think they work for Apple."

The bogus store, where staff admitted to Reuters on Friday was not an authorised reseller, cuts to the core of the risk big brands take in China.

The widespread unauthorised reselling even of real consumer goods means it is more difficult for companies like Apple to manage their brands and risks undermining their longer-term plans to make inroads into the

country.

"It's becoming more of a problem I think," said James Roy, a senior analyst with retail consultancy China Market Research in Shanghai.

"A lot of foreign brands are increasingly really seeking to set up a real retail presence in China, not just selling to resellers or through franchisees," he said.

That China is a hotbed for piracy is nothing new. Multinational companies have long seen problems such as intellectual property theft and unclear regulations as the price of doing business in the world's fastest-growing major economy.

The United States and Europe have persistently pressed Beijing to do a better job of enforcing intellectual

property rights and stamp out the production of everything from fake DVDs to medicine.

An increasing number of US companies in China say the enforcement of intellectual property rights has deteriorated in the last year, an annual survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai released in January showed.

China has said it is cracking down, particularly on piracy, and Western companies have claimed some victories.

This week, Baidu Inc, China's biggest search engine, agreed with top music studios to distribute licensed songs through its mp3 search service, ending a legal dispute over accusations the company encouraged piracy.

The less-publicised phenomenon of

unauthorised vendors setting up shop to peddle real products has grown alongside China's manufacturing prowess. Many of the factories that produce brand-name goods on contract have been known to do extra runs of the goods to make extra cash, analysts say.

Paul French, chief China analyst at retail consultancy Access Asia, said Apple had two choices to clamp down on fake stores.

"One is they either have to police their operations better, or two, they have to sell everything through their own stores and cancel their reseller agreements," he said.

China's high import duties on many goods have also encouraged the likes of the fake Apple store in Kunming, analysts suggest.

Shop owners can buy everything from computers to cosmetics at significantly lower prices overseas, smuggle them into the country, and undercut the prices of official Chinese retailers.

Vendors often turn to Chinese students studying abroad to buy products in the United States, Hong Kong, Australia and other countries.

Internet "bulletin boards" are full of advertisements soliciting interested parties, who can earn 100-200 yuan (\$15-30) in fees per iPhone or iPad they manage to sneak past customs agents when returning home for the summer or winter break.

At first glance, it might appear that companies would not mind having their products bought in other countries or obtained through other means and resold in China through resellers, as it helps drive sales but with less expense and hassle over customer service.

After all, building up a retail presence in a country as vast as China takes time and is expensive. That's why many companies have sought to expand their presence through licensees.

The problem is, any negative experiences customers have with service at unauthorised resellers can backfire on the brand because customers relate their disappointment with the product.



AFP

This handout photo released by a blogger on July 20 shows an employee wearing Apple's trademark blue T-shirt talking to a customer at an alleged fake Apple store in Kunming, in China's Yunnan province, as the Apple website only lists four official stores in China -- two in Beijing and two in Shanghai, and none in Kunming. China's passion for iPads and iPhones has triggered fights, crimes and now a fake Apple store so convincing even employees think they work for Steve Jobs.