

# Famine could affect 15 million in Ethiopia and Eritrea

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Warnings that a severe famine could affect up to 15 million people in Ethiopia and Eritrea have been made by aid agencies. This comes at a time when the famine that is still developing in Southern Africa is affecting 15 million, together with six million needing emergency food rations in Afghanistan and up to two million in Angola.

A recent report from Refugees International (RI) makes the point that the international humanitarian response system is “facing unprecedented stress.” RI states that the crisis in Ethiopia was “unforeseen as recently as June” and that given the relatively tiny amounts spent by the United States and other Western governments on emergency aid, “the crisis that threatens to break the system is in Ethiopia and Eritrea.”

At the beginning of this month a warning was given that failure of rains in Ethiopia could lead to severe food shortages, affecting up to 14 million by the beginning of next year. The UN World Food Programme (WFP) said that six million people would require food in the next few months, and that it faces a shortfall in its pledges from donors of tens of thousands of tonnes.

This was followed by a United Nations aid agencies report warning that a third of the population of Eritrea—more than one million people—will need food aid. Food production within Eritrea will only meet 15 percent of requirements.

Ethiopia faces a shortfall of more than two million metric tonnes of food that would have to be supplied through aid. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi reporting to the Council of People’s Representatives said the country faced the danger of famine and had already distributed 45,000 tonnes of food to areas affected by drought. He called on international governments and aid agencies for more assistance.

Reduced rainfall and crop failure in the recent rainy periods have resulted in the current drought. The region has two rainy periods—the “belg” or short one and the

main “meher” period. These have become more sporadic over recent decades. This may be due to the combined effects of global warming and the El Nino effect. Experts fear the coming harvest of November/December will fail.

One of the worst affected areas in Ethiopia is West Harghe in the Oromia region. Other areas affected include the Afar region, Somali region, Tigray, the southern region as well as other parts of Oromia. A United Nations team, along with high-level delegates from the European Commission and USAID, recently visited the West Hargaghe area. This area, the breadbasket of Ethiopia, was previously regarded as a food-secure area and the fact it now faces famine is an indication of the gravity of the situation. They reported that maize and sorghum crops were wilting in the drought. Inhabitants of the area lined the roads holding up bunches of the withered crops as the convoy of cars carrying the delegation passed. Reports speak of people having to eat roots and fruits from the forests.

The UN World Food Programme assess that 17 percent of children under five suffer severe malnutrition and diseases associated with malnutrition such as marasmus and kwashiorkor are becoming widespread. The Ethiopian government’s Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) estimate that 70 percent of West Hargagehe’s population of 1.6 million people is in urgent need of food aid.

The Afar people of the northeastern region of Ethiopia are nomadic pastoralists, moving their herds of cows, goats and camels from one grazing ground to another. Because of the drought many of their animals are dying. Carcasses of the animals polluting river courses have raised fears of the spread of cholera. The DPPC estimates three quarters of a million people are in need of food aid in the region.

Eritrea’s Relief and Refugee Commission (ERREC) warned in July that it faced the worst drought since 1991.

UN officials visited the country and reported greatly reduced food production in the provinces of Gash Barka and Debub. These two areas are the breadbasket provinces of the country. The annual rains in the coastal areas failed last winter and again in the spring.

Ethiopia and Eritrea have faced food deficits for the last two decades. In the early 1980s severe famine grabbed the headlines when taken up by Bob Geldoff's *Live Aid/Feed the World* campaign. The ongoing food shortage is the result of chronic poverty, soil degradation and instability, which have been compounded by the erratic nature of the rainy periods.

A more fundamental issue, however, is the economic plight of both countries, which means they are unable to deal with such emergencies. Both countries spent millions of dollars on military hardware in a futile war over a border area of 160 square miles of mountainous territory. The war between them that ended in 2000 lasted two and a half years and cost over 100,000 lives. Famine last affected the Horn of Africa in 1999/2000 and was exacerbated by the war.

Both countries have also declined economically over the last period under International Monetary Fund programmes. Ethiopia has particularly suffered because its main export is coffee and world coffee prices have fallen by a staggering 70 percent since 1997. Many farmers who had previously grown food crops were encouraged to switch to coffee and the decline in coffee prices has left them with no income.

Ethiopia ranks 171 out of 174 countries in the UN's Human Development Index. Life expectancy is 43 years and the literacy rate is 35 percent. A recent Panos report states that the average per capita income is less than half a dollar a day. A third of infants die from malnutrition, whilst most of the population has no access to clean water, health services or education.



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