

Africa hit by aid shortfall as famine worsens

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Aid workers in Africa are attempting to draw attention to the shortage of financial support affecting millions in Africa threatened by famine. A joint statement issued on April 21 by the aid agencies Save the Children, Action Aid, CAFOD and Christian Aid drew particular attention to the worsening crisis in Ethiopia:

“We are appalled by the lack of full rations to food aid beneficiaries in Ethiopia, which amount to slow starvation for those without other sources of food. For the international community to allow this to happen in the 21st century is unforgivable.”

The Ethiopian government’s emergency department, the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC), has announced it does not have enough food left to meet full needs and has cut rations by up to a fifth as funds dry up.

Speaking in early April at the United Nations Security Council in New York, UN World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Director James Morris warned of shortfalls in aid to Africa from Western governments. Some of the shortfall was due to aid being diverted to Iraq—a secondary factor that has been focused on in the media—but Morris explained that the WFP needed \$1.8 billion to meet emergency food requirements in Africa this year: “That is equal to all the reserves we were able to gather last year for our projects worldwide ... we remain nearly \$1 billion short.”

It is estimated that some 200 million people in Africa are malnourished and 50 million are severely affected by drought.

Morris had recently completed a trip to Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Sahel and West Africa to assess the situation. He said that in Ethiopia more than 11 million were in need of food and other relief, while another three million could soon be in the same position. Whilst funding for Ethiopia was better than for some other

countries, pledges still only came to 70 percent of the amount needed.

On Eritrea he explained that whilst the absolute numbers needing food aid are lower, it has a smaller population and the funding situation was grim. Two thirds of the Eritrean population are short of food. There are around 900,000 displaced people as a result of the recent war with Ethiopia, and on top of this 1.4 million people are affected by the ongoing drought. Morris explained: “We must quickly find and move an additional 200,000 metric tons into Eritrea to continue and expand our programme to avoid widespread malnutrition and deaths.”

He added that in the Western Sahel, comprising Mauritania, Cape Verde, Gambia, Senegal and Mali, food security had deteriorated rapidly and feeding operations in the region were only 40 percent of what was needed.

He highlighted how the famine in southern Africa is being exacerbated by the AIDS epidemic. Morris had toured southern Africa in January with Stephen Lewis, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s special envoy on AIDS in Africa. The disease is affecting food production, given that women and girls comprise 60 percent of AIDS victims in Africa and 8 out of 10 African farmers are women. He warned: “The peak impact of the AIDS pandemic has not yet arrived in southern Africa and is not expected until 2005-2007. Political structures at the national level in the worst affected countries may gradually just fade away and, along with them, the services and social order they were intended to provide.... We are confronted with the real possibility of a permanent low-grade food crisis created by AIDS.”

The situation was also exacerbating the potential for more wars in Africa: “Many of these governments grew out of the artificial political demarcations left by colonial powers and as political cohesion loosens, the

potential for civil conflicts along the lines of those we see today in the Congo and Cote d'Ivoire grow more likely."

The NGOs Care International and Oxfam issued a joint press release earlier this month titled: "Eritrea: Forgotten by the World". They report that the impact of four continuous years of drought have been aggravated by falling donations. The situation is made worse by the insecurity following the three-year conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea that ended in June 2000. Whilst a commission was set up in December 2000 to settle the disputed border question that was one of the causes of the war, there are continuing disagreements over issues such as whether the village of Badme is Eritrean or Ethiopian.

Experts from the two NGOs explain that the crop failure is the worst for a decade. Basil Lucima, Oxfam's Regional Humanitarian Coordinator, said; "Families who were able to salvage something out of the poor 2002 harvest are eating the seeds that they would normally save to plant next season. They have no other option." The Eritrean government has only a quarter of the 476,000 metric tonnes that it estimates is needed. Liz Sime, CARE's Eritrea Country Director, said, "Lack of information and reliable data have discouraged donors from committing aid, although this is not a sufficient reason for the inadequate donor response."

A recent statement issued by Action Aid gives details of the situation resulting from drought in Ethiopia. Normally there are two rainy seasons, but last year the heavy or meher rains came a month late and lasted only one month instead of the usual three months. The berg or short rainy season did not appear and led to pasture land drying up and livestock dying. In some areas up to 70 percent of the harvest was lost. Over the last five years there have been annual periods when around 4 million people have been dependent on food aid to survive, but by January this year the number had increased to the 11 million cited by Morris.

The statement describes the situation as worse than in 1984, when a million people died of famine. WFP has reserves to cover needs until the end of May, but only half the necessary reserves for June with none at all for July through to September. As well as suffering the impact of the aftermath of war with Eritrea, Ethiopia has to pay billions of dollars in external debt. Coffee,

which is one of Ethiopia's main exports, has been hit by a fall in world prices.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS) for Ethiopia, which was updated in March this year, explains that the danger of famine continues. It states: "Pledges against non-food emergency relief requirements are critically low, thereby severely undermining the effectiveness of food aid interventions. This is reflected in the persistence of very high rates of malnutrition in many areas."

It warns, "Relief interventions in many areas are inadequate to counter an impending humanitarian disaster."

As a result of higher delivery costs the value of food donations has been reduced. There is only enough pledged to meet three quarters of the cereal food aid and around half of the supplementary blended food requirements.

The FEWS statement on Eritrea, issued at the beginning of the year, forecast that the country's ongoing food crisis could only be expected to worsen: "Eritrea is reeling from severe shocks to its asset base, already undermined by years of conflict and drought as well as pervasive poverty. Insufficient rainfall for crops and livestock, labour shortages due to mobilisation, the pressure of internally displaced people and returnees, and an economic tailspin contribute to an overall picture of high food insecurity. Eritrea produced less than 10 percent of its cereal needs for human consumption during 2002 following consecutive crop failures."

FEWS's current monthly update on Eritrea states that the network of food provision in the pipeline will only take the country through to May. It notes: "High food prices and early reliance on market purchases have exhausted household incomes, rendering households highly food insecure. More than the current estimated 1.4 million may need food assistance in the coming months."



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