

# Millions facing drought and famine throughout Africa

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Reports from aid agencies show that many areas in Africa are currently facing drought and threat of famine. In East Africa some 11 million people are suffering a drought that is the worst in a decade and will mean that food aid is urgently needed over the next six months. The countries affected stretch from the Horn of Africa through to Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique.

The January bulletin produced by the USAID Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS) warned of a pre-famine situation in the East African countries of Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and Somalia affecting more than five million people. The report stated: "Numerous pre-famine indicators have been reported, including widespread livestock deaths, culling of young animals to protect breeding animals, distress migration, increased animal and human disease and high acute malnutrition rates...Conditions are likely to get worse in the coming months during the peak hunger season between January and March."

The World Meteorological Organisation, a United Nations body based in Geneva, warned this week that the current drought will last until at least April. Some areas have experienced the driest month for 50 years. Last October to December the so-called short rains failed throughout much of the area, following the partial failure of the short rains in 2004 and the long rains of March to June last year.

In Kenya the UN World Food Programme and the government announced that the northern parts of the Rift Valley and Eastern provinces, the entire North Eastern Province and parts of the Coast are hit by drought. John Munyes, Kenya's Minister of State responsible, said, "These areas depend on livestock production for income and food. Malnutrition rates among children are alarmingly high and the areas have

already seen large numbers of livestock deaths."

In northern Kenya, a severe drought has led to dried up waterholes and destruction of pastureland. In this region 70 percent of the total of a quarter of a million cattle have died. This has exacerbated tensions and conflicts between the different nomadic tribes that live in the area.

An Oxfam report explains that the drought in the Wajir region of northern Kenya has become so severe that even the camels are being affected. It explains normally a camel can go for three or four months without drinking water providing it can eat green pasture. Currently they have to be watered every week. Many families rely on their camels as a source of milk and meat. Camels can normally provide over six litres of milk each day but with the effects of the drought the milk is drying up.

According to the WFP "rates of global acute malnutrition among children under five have risen steeply and in the northeast of the country have risen to between 18 and 30 percent." It added that malnutrition levels of more than 15 percent are classed as emergencies.

In Somalia some 1.7 million people are in need of food aid. Oxfam quoted a local elder: "The situation is as bad as I can remember. Some people are dying and children are drinking their own urine because there is simply no water for them to drink." Families were surviving on one twentieth of the daily water supply recommended by minimum humanitarian standards, "equivalent to 830 ml, or three glasses, of water per person per day for drinking, cooking and washing," and were walking huge distances in temperatures of 40 degrees C to get assistance.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is providing aid to half a million people in

southern Somalia despite the high risk involved. With no central government and 15 years of continuing conflict, the ICRC said that the severe drought had compounded an already dismal humanitarian situation. Somalia lacks basic health and education services and has “the highest number of weapon-wounded casualties in the whole of Africa,” according to the ICRC.

Drought has also hit the south eastern part of Ethiopia, where nearly two million people are affected. A recent study by Save the Children showed that at least one in five children in this region is malnourished.

The small country of Djibouti has also reported an emergency situation, with up to 150,000 people, mainly pastoralists, being forced to move into the capital Djibouti because of the drought.

East Africa is not the only part of the African continent currently facing food shortages. According to the WFP nearly 20 million people are undernourished in a number of countries in West Africa, including Chad, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Sierra Leone and Togo. Many of these countries have suffered the effects of drought and locust infestation and some have been affected by military conflict.

A WFP bulletin issued in January explained that the WFP was aiming to feed 10 million people in West Africa in 2006. It had issued an appeal for US\$237 million but to date had only received US\$18.4 million.

Niger hit the headlines last year when it was reported that pleas for international donations went unheeded for many months when the country was facing famine. The WFP reports that in Niger “crushing poverty and crippling debt continue to undermine the ability of rural families to fend for themselves.” It explained that US\$22 million was urgently needed if the delivery of food to Niger was to continue.

Poverty is particularly serious in West Africa, with the lowest seven countries in the United Nations Development Programmes Human Development Index in this region. Around three million under fives suffer acute malnutrition and nine million suffer chronic malnutrition.

In spite of recent good rainfalls many parts of Southern Africa are still suffering the ongoing impact of four years of erratic weather. The WFP is supplying aid to over eight million people in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Whilst weather is a factor the WFP cites chronic poverty, the lack of seeds and fertiliser, as well as the high rates of HIV/AIDS, as causing the huge problems of malnutrition in this region.

Food shortages have now become the norm in many parts of Africa, with one person in three undernourished. The situation is getting worse, with the number of undernourished people rising by 33 million between 1992 and 2002. According to UNICEF 38 percent of children under the age of five are stunted, and 28 percent are underweight. The WFP has to provide twice as much emergency food to Africa than a decade ago. James Morris, WFP Executive Director, comments that “These statistics do not augur well for Africa’s future—and they cannot be ignored, especially since the world has produced enough food for everyone on the planet for decades.”

Although the situation has been exacerbated by unfavourable weather conditions, there is a general consensus amongst aid agencies that the root cause is growing poverty. The impact of World Bank and International Monetary Fund measures has undermined the ability of governments to provide subsidies and emergency support for the subsistence agriculture that provides the majority of African people with their livelihood.

A report produced by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in December 2005 calculates that to halve the amount of child malnutrition by 2015—part of the UN’s Millennium Development Goals—through providing investment in rural road construction, education, clean water provision, agricultural research and irrigation, would cost an increase in aid from Western governments of \$8 billion a year. Needless to say there is no chance that even this modest target—far less than the annual debt repayment from Africa to the Western banks—will be met.



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