

Global food price rises exacerbate famine in Ethiopia and Somalia

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It is not unusual for Ethiopia and Somalia to be hit by drought and food shortages, but this year the rise in food costs makes an already disastrous situation worse.

In Ethiopia, the area affected is in the triangle of land in the east and southeast bordering Kenya and Somalia, comprising the Somalia, Oromiya and Amhara regions. According to Reuters, a NASA earth observatory picture taken from space shows the “eastern half of the country withered in drought.”

Around 4.5 million Ethiopians are in need of food aid, with as many as 75,000 children facing acute malnutrition and illness.

Ken Caldwell, international operations director for the charity Save the Children, explained, “Hunger hits children first and hits them hardest. Ethiopian children, who are going hungry because their parents can’t afford to feed them, will be among the first victims of the global food price rises.”

As in previous years the impact of a poor *belg* rainfall (the *belg* rains fall March to May) has left the area to be classified by FEWSNET (famine early warning network) as either “highly” or “extremely” food-insecure.

A Reuters report of June 13 quoted Elisabeth Byrs, of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“Seasonal rains have been poor or have failed in many parts of Ethiopia with dramatic effects on harvests in crop-producing areas,” she explained, and the effects of the drought had doubled the numbers needing food aid.

All the NGOs working in Ethiopia repeat the danger to children. The American-based CHF International explains how the drought’s effect on livestock means that milk production has almost ceased, and that this is having a marked impact on children’s nutrition.

The medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), in a press release of June 5, said, “Since MSF started its intervention in this region on 13 May, over 700 children with complicated severe malnutrition...have been admitted to its three stabilisation centres. In addition more than 1,500 other malnourished children are being treated as outpatients in eight clinics around the region. In Ethiopia around 7 million people routinely rely on food aid—malnutrition is nothing new. However, this year, the situation is much worse.... An MSF emergency nutritional project will generally be started if a rate of 3 percent severe acute malnutrition is found in a certain area. In some places in Ethiopia, recent assessments revealed a rate of 11 percent.”

The UN has launched an appeal for US\$325 million to provide 400,000 tonnes of food aid in Ethiopia. The fact that just two months ago the UN estimated around US\$70 million was needed shows the rapidly increasing severity of the situation.

One indication of the impact of rising food prices and the weakening of the Ethiopian currency is a statement by the UN that staple food costs nearly four times more than a year ago.

The NGOs, as well as pointing to the longer term factors—the impact of climate change making droughts more frequent and the reduced agricultural output resulting from IMF-World Bank economic programmes—also highlight massive food price rises.

Care International on its website comments: “The situation in Ethiopia is not only due to the current drought but a combination of additional factors including dwindling natural resources and agricultural productivity due to the effects of climate change.... For millions of people, there just isn’t food available, but in many cases even food is for sale on local markets, the

price is so exorbitant that poor people simply can't afford to pay”.

Francois Calas, MSF head of mission, explained that whilst the failure of the early *belg* rains had initiated the famine, “other factors such as high rates of inflation and an increase in food prices have also played a part. For most people life here is a daily struggle and for many of them this year that struggle became too much to bear.”

In Ethiopia, as in most African countries, agriculture has been seriously set back over the last three decades by IMF-World Bank free-market policies as well as by the influx of subsidised US and European Union food production after local markets have been forced open by the World Trade Organisation's Agreement on Agriculture.

A recent article entitled “Destroying African Agriculture” by Walden Bello in *Foreign Policy in Focus* is an indictment of the impact of Western policies. He writes, “African agriculture is a case study of how doctrinaire economics serving corporate interests can destroy a whole continent's productive base. At the time of decolonisation in the 1960s, Africa was not just self-sufficient in food but was actually a net food exporter... Today the continent imports 25 percent of its food, with almost every country being a net food importer.... [S]tructural adjustment saddled Africa with low investment, increased unemployment, reduced social spending, reduced consumption, and low output, all combining to create a vicious cycle of stagnation and decline.”

He continues, “According to Oxfam, the number of Africans living on less than a dollar a day more than doubled to 313 million people between 1981 and 2001.... [S]tructural adjustment [has had the effect of] severely weakening the continent's agricultural base and consolidating import dependency.”

Neighbouring Somalia has also been hit by drought, but here the situation is made seriously worse by the invasion of US-backed Ethiopian troops coming to the rescue of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). For the last year and a half, they have attempted to drive out the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) that ruled the capital Mogadishu and large parts of Somalia during 2006. The ICU drove out the warlords that preyed on the civilian population, many of whom are allied to the TFG. Washington, which claimed that the ICU

contained Al Qaeda members, has justified the invasion and subsequent atrocities on the grounds of pursuing the “war on terror.”

The UN has warned that the number of people needing emergency food relief in Somalia is likely to increase by nearly a third to 3.5 million in the next three months.

Few NGOs now risk working in Somalia. Medecins Sans Frontieres had four of its aid workers killed this year but continues to operate in 12 locations through local people. Its latest report on the situation in Hawa Afdi, on the road between Mogadishu and Afgooye where many have fled the fighting in the capital, reports a 400 percent increase in the number of children under five suffering malnutrition.

“Between 13 and 19 June, over 500 children under five years' old were admitted to this nutritional programme [in Hawa Afdi], suffering from acute malnutrition,” MSF reports. In the Mogadishu-to-Afgooye corridor, more than 250,000 people are now living in extremely crowded conditions, with their number steadily increasing as they flee the fighting in the capital.

MSF states that in all its 12 locations, “we have seen a drastic deterioration in the health situation over the last year, and increases in malnutrition over the last three months.” It also points to the issue of the increasing prices of staple foods, explaining that “Some items have risen by up to 200 percent since the beginning of this year.” Food price rises have been compounded by the devaluation of the currency by 80 percent between April 2007 and 2008.



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