

Famine threat in the Horn of Africa

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The countries comprising the Horn of Africa face the threat of famine, after a series of failed and poor rainy seasons has created the worst drought in 60 years.

The 2010 late rainy season failed completely in many parts of the area and the April-May rains were very low, with northeast Kenya getting only 10 percent of the usual rainfall. The impact is worst in Somalia and Ethiopia, but Kenya, Djibouti and parts of Uganda are also affected.

The current USAID Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) map of the area, indicating levels of food insecurity, shows large parts of Ethiopia and Somalia classed as in emergency and most of the remaining parts of each country classed as in crisis. Large areas of northeastern Kenya are classed as in crisis. In total, around 10 million people are affected.

FEWSNET uses an internationally recognised 5 level code to indicate phases of food insecurity. The phases are 1: none or minimal, 2: stressed, 3: crisis, 4: emergency and 5: catastrophe or famine.

While not yet a full blown famine, many fear the situation is approaching a tipping point where this would become inevitable. Sarah Robinson from the Irish humanitarian agency on the ground in Somalia explained, “A combination of hunger and despair means that many people simply go to sleep and do not have the energy to wake up. This has the potential to be as bad as anything since 1991.”

A major famine in 1991 killed around a quarter of a million people and left two million displaced.

In Somalia the drought and threatened famine are compounded by the ongoing civil war and social upheaval. Some people leaving the drought ravaged rural areas have trekked to the capital, Mogadishu, but many more have headed for Ethiopia and Kenya.

Hundreds of thousands of people are on the move, some walking for weeks and covering hundreds of miles in search of relief. One woman, Fatuma, speaking

to the Save the Children Fund said she had walked for six weeks with her four children, all under 11, from Somalia to a refugee camp in Kenya.

She explained, “The weather was very harsh. It was so hot, and there was very little shelter. I left my husband in Somalia. I do not know if I will see him again. The war in Somalia is very bad for families. The drought is just too much. We cannot cope. We had 15 goats. But they died one by one because of the drought. We had a well in my village, but it dried up. Then the one in the next village dried up.”

One refugee camp at Dadaab, in the northeastern area of Kenya, was built to hold 90,000 people but is now trying to cope with more than four times that number, with thousands squatting on the perimeter hoping to get in. Dadaab has now become the largest refugee camp in the world.

The Horn of Africa area has been accustomed to scarce water supplies at some times of the year, but the pattern of rainfall does seem to be changing. In much of the area of Ethiopia and Somalia the failure of two successive rainy periods is something that would occur every 10 years or so, but now appears to occur every two years. United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) spokesman for the area, Michael Klaus, explained, “We realised these recurrent droughts used to happen every 5-10 years but what we see now is it basically every other year... an indication of climate change conditions.”

According to the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the rainfall data for 2010-11 for much of Kenya and Ethiopia was the driest or second driest for 60 years. Climate researchers are beginning to attribute extreme weather patterns to climate change. Peter Stott at the Met Office Hadley Centre in Britain recently stated, “We’ve certainly moved beyond the point of saying that we can’t say anything about attributing extreme weather events to climate change.”

Adapting to the harsh conditions of the area, many people live in pastoral communities moving their herds of animals to pasture and water in neighbouring areas to be able to maintain their herds. This way of life had been sustainable and was a big contribution to the GDP of countries in the Horn of Africa. The current drought is killing hundreds of thousands of herd animals, destroying the pastoral people's livelihoods.

Until recent days there had been little international media coverage of the fast developing potential catastrophe in the Horn of Africa. It has now received some coverage, but there is still a big shortfall in the levels of aid been offered to alleviate the situation.

Aid agencies have appealed for around \$530 million in donations for Kenya and the same for Somalia, but so far have received only about half of what is needed. The WFP issued a statement last week saying, "The humanitarian response in Somalia and Ethiopia in particular is hampered by large funding shortfalls. New contributions are urgently needed or suffering will grow."

The situation is being exacerbated by rising food prices. Kenya is currently experiencing double-digit inflation and, according to a UN IRIN news report, the price of maize, one of the main food staples has risen threefold since January. In Djibouti, wheat flour rose by 17 percent in the course of one month earlier in the year.

A World Development Movement (WDM) report on responses to the recent hike in food prices quoted a Nairobi transport worker saying. "Maybe it's time we went the way of Egypt."

A WDM report issued in June warned of a summer of speculation boosting food prices. The report notes, "The price of maize—more of which is grown than any other staple food crop—has increased by 102 percent since April 2010. New research from the World Development Movement reveals that hedge funds, investment banks and others own futures contracts for maize worth \$15.7 billion up 127.5 percent from a year ago."



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