

Global food crisis takes heavy toll on east Africa

Spiralling food prices, widespread drought, and insufficient action by international donors, have left populations in the Horn of Africa on the brink of famine. Samuel Loewenberg reports.

An estimated 8.8 million people in east Africa are going hungry, and a sluggish international response is failing to address the growing crisis, which is approaching famine conditions in some areas. The USA, Europe, and other wealthy donors, despite warnings forecasting the crisis since late last year, have responded too little and too late, forcing international aid agencies to reduce emergency feeding programmes in the region.

The US Government's Famine Early Warning Network issued a series of special alerts in June calling it "the most severe food security emergency in the world today...exacerbated by extremely high food prices, reduced coping capacity, and a limited humanitarian response".

The agency alert warned that "large-scale emergency assistance is urgently needed across the eastern Horn of Africa in order to save lives, treat acute malnutrition, and prevent further asset losses".

Emergency appeals throughout the region have only received 51% of the US\$1.293 billion in requested funding for Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, according to the UN. "The response is slow, coming in small quantities, and coming in late, at a time when the impact has been hitting hard on children and pregnant women", said Geoffrey Kalebbo Denye, of the aid agency World Vision in Kenya. If sufficient funds had arrived earlier, it could have substantially reduced the effect of the drought, he said.

Despite warnings forecasting the crisis since November, 2010, by March, 2011, the World Food Programme (WFP) was 60% underfunded, and had to cut back its feeding programmes in Somalia and Ethiopia. The shortfall is now down to about 30%.

The crisis in east Africa has received very little press coverage outside the region, but world leaders are no strangers to the severity of the conditions, especially President Barack Obama, who visited Wajir, one of the worst hit areas in Kenya during a drought in 2006. Wajir, has

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such severe drought that, according to local reports, pregnant women are forced to walk 20 km for water, more than 50% of herd animals have died as a result of starvation, and some residents are even seeking sustenance in war-torn Somalia.

A Kenyan television report from the region described an area "once bustling with life, but now an uncomfortable silence dominates in a place that had been mostly green... residents were forced to move earlier this year, their only source of water ran dry. It is the same story in many other parts of northern Kenya".

The current crisis, which is centred in northern Kenya, southern Somalia, and southeastern Ethiopia, has been a chronic problem, but made more severe this year by a combination of drought—it is one of the driest years since 1950—brought on by climate change, deepening poverty, diversion of maize to ethanol, and skyrocketing oil and food prices.

In Kenya, the price of maize has shot up by more than 200% since October, and in Somalia the price of the staple food sorghum has jumped 240%.

Globally, the world food price spikes have plunged more than 44 million people into extreme poverty, according to the World Bank. A poll by Oxfam of 17 countries showed that roughly half the population is changing its diet because of rising prices.

Meanwhile, many attribute the lack of rain to climate change. A graph for rainfall in the Horn of Africa over the past 20 years shows a clear and steady decline, said WFP's Peter Smerdon.

Either way, the effects are devastating. "You drive through the desert and see corpses of cattle, camels, giraffes. The primary income source of these people has been effectively knocked out by the drought", said Andrew Wander of Save the Children UK. Pregnant and nursing mothers are reduced to one meal a day, he said.

Although the current crisis was predicted, it was in no way inevitable. Faster, and more robust action by the international community could have ameliorated the crisis, and can still make a big difference as the brutal summer months approach. The primary problem is not a lack of food, but high prices and market breakdowns that put food out of reach of poor people, said Chris Barrett,



Rainfall has decreased in the Horn of Africa over the past 20 years, causing drought



Bert Wender/Save the Children

Thousands of young children in Kenya need therapeutic or supplementary feeding

an agronomist in the school of management at Cornell University, NY, USA. In recent decades, there has been very little investment in agriculture assistance in Africa, which is exactly what could have helped in a crisis like the current one. “The big problem is that we are not investing in relatively obviously solutions” like fertiliser, irrigation, and crop insurance, he said.

The problem is that the USA, Europe, and other wealthy donors tend to wait until the crisis is full blown—eg, television pictures of babies with bloated bellies—until they hand over badly needed funds. “Donors are inherently driven by the politics of response”, said Barrett. As one senior US aid official describes it, humanitarian assistance is almost non-existent in Somalia, weak in Ethiopia, and just ramping up in Kenya.

This situation hampers preventive work by aid agencies that would lessen the crisis, and now they cannot even keep up with the emergency situation. “We are trying to make sure that those most in need receive what we have, but what we have is insufficient to carry the full case load”, said Smerdon of the WFP. Currently, the agency faces a \$200 million shortfall of \$658 million needed for their emergency operations in the region over the next 6 months.

Most of the people at risk are herding communities and small farmers, people who are already extremely

poor who have been pushed over the edge by the worst drought in 60 years. They are forced to sell off their animals and harvests at low prices to feed themselves, and often go into debt. The loss of their assets means that the cycle of poverty and hunger is certain to be repeated.

“From the nutrition point of view, it is possibly the worst we have seen in the last 20 years”, Noreen Prendiville, chief of nutrition at UNICEF’s Kenya office, told *IRIN News*. She said that Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates in some of the areas worst affected by the drought are more than 35%.

Information about other health effects of the crisis are scattered. In Ethiopia, the UN reports that more than 1 million children are at risk of measles, 362 000 are at risk of malaria, 72 400 are at risk of meningitis, and almost 14 500 people are at risk of acute watery diarrhoea. Furthermore, education attendance, which has long-term effects on health, has decreased substantially, with at least 280 schools closing, affecting about 58 000 students. In Kenya, 726 599 children younger than 5 years and 294 815 pregnant and lactating mothers are set to receive therapeutic and supplementary feeding.

Meanwhile, the conditions in refugee camps for people fleeing Somalia, although never good, are approaching catastrophic. The Dadaab refugee camp on the Somali and Kenya border is already the largest concentration of refugees in the world (it is actually three camps), but lately, because of the drought, the number of refugees has swelled. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported that in the past 2 weeks of June the Dadaab refugee complex had received more than 20 000 Somali refugees. The new arrivals are mostly farmers and animal herders, many of them dangerously exhausted and dehydrated after walking for days. Dadaab now has a population of more than 360 000, many of whom are living with no

facilities on the outskirts of the badly overcrowded camps. Many have acute malnutrition. UNHCR reports an increase in mortality rates in children younger than 5 years among the new arrivals. “In the first quarter of 2011, more deaths were documented in the emergency therapeutic programs than was documented in all 2010”, said the agency. Children in emergency feeding centres often weigh less than 50% of the norm for their age group, according to officials.

A recently released survey of the Melkadida and Bokolmayo refugee camps in Ethiopia found a desperate decline in conditions. The GAM prevalence is about 33% and the Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) prevalence is more than 11%. “Any GAM prevalence above 10% and SAM prevalence above 1.0% is considered to be an unacceptable situation that requires immediate intervention”, according to the report, undertaken by the UN and several other international aid agencies. People who have arrived in the past 3 months have a malnutrition rate of 45%—“exceeding all emergency thresholds”.

In late June, the G20 meeting of the world’s rich countries promised to address agricultural and food supply issues. But despite high hopes for strong action, anti-poverty advocates said the promises fell badly short. “High expectations that politicians were finally starting to take the record spike in food prices seriously were crushed in Paris”, said Jean-Cyril Dagorn, policy adviser for Oxfam’s GROW campaign. The leaders failed to deal with such pressing issues as agricultural investment, food commodity speculation, climate change, or biofuels, according to Oxfam.

Earlier in June, the US House of Representatives voted to cut the \$1.5 billion US emergency overseas feeding programme by a third. The USA is by far the world’s largest food donor.

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