
Famine in the Horn of Africa

Bob Hargrave

The current drought and famine in the Horn of Africa are deeply distressing. The severe drought of the past year has put an estimated 12 million or more people in danger of starvation.¹

The news coming out of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia is discouraging. According to the Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the news is “nothing short of shocking:

- More than 12 million people in need of life-saving care in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia.
- 29,000 children dead since mid-May.”²

As early as last year, the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS-NET) warned of drought.³ In Ethiopia and Kenya, plans were made and food is being delivered to those in greatest need. But as Josette Sheeran, Director of the World Food Program, remarked in a recent interview, “Droughts may not be avoidable, but famines are.”⁴ In Somalia, relief food cannot get to people who need it, due to the lack of security. It is there that this crisis has been officially declared a famine.⁵

The situation is also serious in the refugee camps in Kenya near the Somali border. In a recent address to IFPRI, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton commented on Dadaab, a refugee complex in Eastern Kenya:

“Even before this emergency, it was the largest refugee camp in the world. Some people have been living there now for 20 years. It was originally built for 90,000 people. Twenty years later, more than 420,000 live there, including thousands of third generation residents.” She also commented, “Well over a thousand people arrive every day.”¹

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the millions who are suffering through this crisis, and to those who are working tirelessly to save lives.

Can this be Africa’s last famine?

What can be done to prevent famines in the future? What should be the role of ECHO and those of you in the ECHO global network?

Scientists, policy makers and development practitioners agree that long term solutions include:

- Assisting smallholder farmers to increase production
- More drought-tolerant crops
- Resilient farming systems, flexible enough to produce under variable conditions
- A functioning government
- Improved infrastructure
- Favorable national and international trade policies
- For pastoralists:
 - Better access to fair market
 - Better animal health care
 - Good range management systems (appropriate stocking rates; access to water; managed forages)
 - Diversification into crop production, incorporating agroforestry practices and supplemental irrigation where possible

Long-term solutions for dealing with drought and avoiding famine will take concerted effort from all stakeholders, from the individual farmer with limited resources (and those of you living among and assisting those communities) all the way up to international policies and the highest levels of government.

We at ECHO work to provide you with information, ideas and encouragement, so that you can promote proven best practices such as Conservation Agriculture (see EDN 98-1) and Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (EDN 58-4 and 90-3). We encourage you to cooperate with government agriculturalists to identify crops that are best suited for your country and climate zone. Kenya and Ethiopia have strong agricultural research organizations and have developed drought-resistant crops. There has also been a renewed interest in indigenous vegetables, as reported in this issue. In many of the drier areas, improvements in supplemental irrigation will be key to reducing risk for farmers while increasing production and crop diversity.

ECHO cannot offer a simple immediate solution to the disaster in the Horn of Africa. But we all have a part to play in improving the complex global system of food security. Thank you for your faithful service in your community. May we all continue striving for a world without hunger.

Footnotes

1 Remarks by US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at IFPRI.

2 Shenggen Fan, Director General, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Opening Remarks, IFPRI Special Event, From Famine to Food Security: Meeting the Challenge in the Horn of Africa, Address by US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, August 11, 2011. www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/ShenggenFanStatement.pdf (http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/Shenggen_Fan_Statement.pdf)

3 www.fews.net (<http://www.fews.net/>)

4 www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/july-dec11/famine2_07-29.html (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/july-dec11/famine2_07-29.html)

5 Famine thresholds surpassed in three new areas of southern Somalia www.foodsecurityportal.org/sites/default/files/somalia_08032011.pdf (http://www.foodsecurityportal.org/sites/default/files/somalia_08032011.pdf)

