

UNICEF launches relief appeal as severe drought threatens Ethiopia

GODE, Ethiopia, 26 January 2006 – Two tiny babies lie cradled in the arms of their mother and older sister in Gode Hospital, near the southernmost edge of Ethiopia's remote, drought-stricken Somali region. At first glance you would never know that they were twins.

Asma is small for her age, but gurgles like any other 2-month-old baby. Her brother Niman, however, lies silently, his eyes blank, his skin stretched tightly over his shrunken face and frame.

Severe drought threatens region

Niman is one of an ever-growing stream of babies coming into the hospital's UNICEF-supported therapeutic treatment unit following the onset of a severe drought across the region, set off by the near total failure of two successive seasonal rains.

His mother, Ayan Abdi, trekked more than 200 kilometres from the Somali region's parched East Imay district to bring her babies to the centre and have them treated with life-saving therapeutic milk.

Niman is struggling more than his sister, because their mother is so weak she only has enough breast milk for one baby. Following local tradition, she is giving most of it to the first born twin, the girl.

"I lost a child the last time the rains didn't come," says Ayan, sitting on a mattress in the cramped ward shared with twelve other mothers and young children. "Now it is happening again."



It is estimated that up to 98,000 people died during the last major drought in Somali region in 2000. This time round, however, there are real hopes that a similar widespread disaster could be averted.

UNICEF launches relief appeal

UNICEF has launched an appeal for \$14.7 million to bring relief to people affected by the drought that stretches beyond Ethiopia, to Kenya and Somalia. \$7.9 million of that appeal will be targeted for Ethiopia alone.

"We are in the early days of a drought that could turn into a major human catastrophe," said Björn Ljungqvist, UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia.

"UNICEF, the Government and other partners are already starting to roll out a wide-ranging emergency response, ranging from emergency water tankering to funding fully-stocked mobile health teams. Now that we have launched our appeal, we have a real chance to make a difference. The alarm has been raised in time. But if we don't get the support we need, the results will be catastrophic. As ever, women and children will bear the brunt of this disaster."

In all, more than 1.75 million Ethiopians will be struggling to survive without sufficient food, health, nutrition and care. More than 737,000 people urgently need emergency water supplies.

More than 56,000 children aged under 5 are facing malnutrition in the Somali and Oromiya regions of southern Ethiopia right now – a number that is expected to climb sharply as the drought worsens.

UNICEF initiates emergency response

UNICEF Ethiopia has already started rolling out its emergency response, partly funded by an early donation from the government of Norway. Early interventions include water tankering to 76,000 of the region's worst-affected people; the funding of detailed nutritional assessments across the area; and the support of 16 mobile health teams that will be able to treat 410,000 people.

UNICEF is starting an anti-measles campaign that will eventually reach more than 750,000 under-5s. Plans are also in place to rehabilitate 20 defective boreholes to ensure that water interventions have a long-term impact.

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