

Malnutrition and disease pose grave risks to children in drought-ravaged areas of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia

Nairobi, 25 January 2006 – As a severe drought, the worst in a decade, ravages parts of East Africa and the Horn, appeals are going out to the world community for resources for the approximately six million people in desperate need of humanitarian assistance in southern Ethiopia, northern Kenya and central and southern Somalia. The drought is taking a high toll on an estimated 1.2 million affected children under the age of five, who are especially vulnerable to the threats posed by malnutrition and disease.

Two successive years of failed rains have precipitated the crisis in the ecologically fragile area that converges in southern Ethiopia, northern Kenya, and central and southern Somalia, where agricultural productivity was already in decline due to local insecurity and conflicts. The many pastoral communities are hit particularly hard by the failed rains, as the death of their livestock leaves them with nothing to exchange for survival.

“This drought ominously compounds an already dismal humanitarian situation,” said UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa Per Engebak. “Many factors have chipped away at the people’s survival capacities and this drought is further contributing to the erosion of those capacities as a growing number of people are becoming destitute.”

Children face high and rising malnutrition rates in the dry, not easily accessible and poorly serviced area. More than 56,000 under-five children are facing malnutrition in the Somali and Oromiya regions of southern Ethiopia – a number that is expected to rise sharply as the drought worsens. Kenya estimates that between 40,000 – 60,000 children and women in the 27 affected districts are malnourished. It is expected that as many as 3 out of 10 children in the drought-affected areas of Somalia will be malnourished.

The combination of high malnutrition rates or wasting with generally low measles immunization rates portends the real possibility of a major measles outbreak. Children weakened by malnutrition are at gravely higher risk of any infection and measles is one of the most virulent, spreading lethally and quickly among the unimmunized. During the last drought in 2000, measles accounted for 22 per cent of all deaths of under-five children in Ethiopia, for example.

In southern Somalia, years of inter-clan fighting and lack of basic social services mean that about 90 per cent of under-five children remain unimmunized against measles. The scenario is similar in the affected regions in Ethiopia where the last immunization campaign took place in 2003 and routine immunization levels are abysmally low.

Present indications in Somalia point to measles and malnutrition accounting for over 50 per cent of deaths should an epidemic occur, making it critical that immunization and nutrition campaigns receive support in the affected areas to preempt outbreaks.

With the drought, threats to children other than disease escalate. Schools in parts of northern Kenya already are blighted by poor education indicators, and many are now reporting increased absenteeism and drop out rates, as children join in the search and struggle for pasture for weakened animals and food and water for their own and their families’ survival.



“We have seen many times over that when it comes to drought, the family’s need to survive overrides the long term educational development of children,” said Changu Mannathoko, UNICEF Regional Advisor on Education. “Our efforts must ensure that we meet the families’ immediate survival needs without necessarily compromising the long term future of their children.”

UNICEF is urgently appealing for US \$14.7 million to bring life-saving support to communities and families in greatest need to cover the next three months. Working with the three governments, UNICEF plans to expand therapeutic and supplementary feeding programmes, step up vaccination and vitamin A campaigns, provide water and sanitation services, and reduce the potential for abuse and exploitation of children resulting from loss of income, movement of people and competition for very limited resources across borders.

The financial resources will enable UNICEF and its partners to reduce absenteeism and dropouts by providing water tanks in schools, distributing school tents and education kits and expanding borehole coverage in the most vulnerable community areas.

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