

## FEATURE STORY

### Mass Vaccination Campaign in Ethiopian Refugee Camp

By Malene Kamp Jensen

**DOLLO ADO, Ethiopia, 18 August** – Forty-year-old Taakow sits under the stingy shade of a shrub with her 2-year-old, taking a rest from the sun and a tumultuous morning where her toddler was one of hundreds of children to receive a jab in the arm, two drops to the tongue, and a purple ink print to the thumb during a mass measles and polio vaccination campaign that started today in one of the Dollo Ado refugee camps on the Somali border.

Taakow says she came to the tented health point in the Malkadida camp to get her son vaccinated after health workers urged mothers to protect their children from diseases that could easily prey on Dollo Ado's children, many of whom are malnourished.

Much like the thousands of other families who have arrived to Dollo Ado this year, Taakow decided to leave Somalia after drought killed her cattle and her hope of keeping her five children alive. In pure desperation, she and the children set out on foot recently, tracking three days across parched terrain and areas of famine and war to come to dust filled Dollo Ado in search of food and water.

"It was gone, all gone," said Taakow about her crop and cattle in Somalia and the reason for making the long journey. For her, there is no looking back.

But by first sight, things do not look much better in Malkadida than what they left behind. Yet Taakow says that at least here there is hope for the children as the Ethiopian Government, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations are on the ground to provide life-saving support. Her son was malnourished but is getting better and is now strong enough to snack on fortified therapeutic food in the form of a vitamin induced nutty paste. The vaccinations he just received with the support of UNICEF will help protect him against diseases that can quickly spread in densely populated refugee camps. Because of years of war and a dilapidated health system, many of the refugee children have never received any primary health care in Somalia.

Dollo Ado is now home to over 119,000 Somali refugees, of whom more than 78,000 have arrived this year alone. Of them, 80% are children. Under the overall coordination of the Government's Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) and UNHCR, UNICEF is providing support to the mass vaccination campaigns, such as the one that kicked off here today and that was just completed in nearby Kobe, following increased fear that measles could come to the four camps that make up Dollo Ado.

For the past several weeks, UNICEF deployed technician, Girma Birru, has been busy repairing cold chain equipment to ensure that vaccinations are good to go, while Mutrib Bakhrudinov, a doctor with UNICEF has been joining other health workers in getting up at the crack of dawn to help administer vaccines. The target group is some 133,000 children –

both within the refugee community and from the Ethiopian families in the area, many of whom are also suffering from severe drought. So far this year, UNICEF has provided around 142,540 doses of measles vaccines and some 73,710 of polio oral drops to the Dollo Ado area.

“It feels good to be here, you feel that you can make a difference,” said Bakhruddinov, explaining that the next step of the vaccination cycle is to go from tent to tent to check the ink print of children and make sure that everyone was reached.

UNICEF is also working with UNHCR, ARRA and other relief groups such as Save the Children, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Oxfam to provide support in nutrition, including supplies such as fortified therapeutic foods, along with access to water, hygiene and sanitation. In addition, UNICEF is working with partners to help establish safe spaces for children and youth and ensure that when September comes, children will be able to continue their education – if not in formal structures at first, then at least through temporary means of learning.

Despite the ramped up efforts to provide better services, much more is needed – and urgently. Life in Dollo Ado is harsh by any means – and many of the children who have arrived here after a gruelling walk across the desert are in poor health and extremely vulnerable.

Yet 25-year-old Away Abdulay is still happy she made the more than ten day track to Malkadida. It was when the last of the family’s 15 cattle died that she picked up her 2-year-old baby and followed her parents and thousands of others across the border and into Ethiopia.

“At home, we were desperate,” she says. “At least here, there is something for my baby.”