

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION TO SAVE LIVES IN DROUGHT AFFECTED ETHIOPIA

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, 4 February 2006 – As severe drought threatens the lives of 1.75 million Ethiopians along the country's south-eastern border with Kenya and Somalia, UNICEF today called on donors to fill a USD 7.94 million gap in emergency funding for critical non-food interventions.

The clock is ticking for the children who are already bearing the brunt of the growing emergency. More than 56,000 children are estimated to be suffering from moderate and severe malnutrition in affected areas, a number which is expected to rise dramatically over the next three months during the traditionally dry season in the region.

Measles, which preys on the weakened immune systems of malnourished children and was linked to more than 20 per cent of the deaths of children under five during the 2000 drought emergency, is also on the rise.

“Drought need not be a death sentence for children living in affected communities,” said Dan Toole, Director of UNICEF's World Wide Office of Emergency Programmes at the end of a recent visit to Ethiopia's Somali Region. We can save thousands of lives if we can get the emergency health, nutrition, water and sanitation interventions to them before it is too late. The time to act is now.”

An estimated 100,000 people died in Somali Region during the first six months of the 2000 drought emergency, more than half of whom were children under five. Six year later, however, improvements in the regional government's early warning system and better reporting by humanitarian organizations have triggered the alarm early enough to enable action that can save lives.

Despite this precious lead time, however, donors have been slow to respond to the non-food emergency needs that are desperately needed to save the lives of drought affected children and women in Ethiopia. Since the Government of Ethiopia and humanitarian partners issued the emergency appeal on 23 January, UNICEF has only secured USD 600,000 from Norway to pay for life-saving therapeutic and supplementary feeding programmes, measles vaccination and vitamin A supplementation campaigns and emergency water and sanitation programmes.

“Unlike the 2000 drought emergency in Somali Region which caught the humanitarian community by surprise, today we are better positioned to provide the timely emergency response that can save thousands of lives,” said Toole. “In order to prevent the kind of tragedy that unfolded in Niger last year, however, we need donors to respond generously and immediately.”

The present emergency, brought on by consecutive failed rainy seasons, comes on top of an already high level of vulnerability in the affected areas. More than 50 per cent of the

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populations in these areas have had to survive on emergency assistance since as far back as 1998. The herds of animals upon which the largely pastoralist communities depend for their livelihoods, have not recovered from the impact of successive droughts.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia and partners in the humanitarian community has already begun providing emergency water tankering activities in Somali Region. Rehabilitation and maintenance of defunct water schemes as well as emergency drilling of deep wells are planned in both Oromiya and Somali Regions alongside sanitation and hygiene education activities. UNICEF has also begun immunizing 314,000 children under five against measles and plans to reach a total of 750,000 in three months.

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