

FEATURE STORIES

Coping with severe drought in Ethiopia's southern Moyale district

By Andrew Heavens

MOYALE DISTRICT, Southern Ethiopia, 20 February 2006 – More than 100 men, women and children crowd around the edge of a rough-cast well in Ethiopia's southern Moyale district – held back by a single man carrying a whip fashioned out of a broken branch.

The man gives a short cry and the crowd surges forward, throwing buckets down over the edge, leaning back to pour the water into cracked jerry cans, kicking over each other's containers in the crush.



They have to move quickly, because this is probably the last water they and their children are going to see for more than 10 days. The water arrived two hours earlier, pumped out of a leaky government tanker truck. A few hours later it is all gone.

Ethiopia's severe drought

Moyale is at the heart of a devastating drought that has left an estimated 737,000 Ethiopians struggling to survive without access to clean water.

The district sits on Ethiopia's porous border with Kenya, the southernmost part of Ethiopia's lowland Oromiya region. Most traditional water sources – from hand-dug wells to underground cisterns – have already dried up after the near-total failure of two successive rainy seasons.

UNICEF Ethiopia has already moved into the drought-stricken region, which stretches out beyond Oromiya to the country's remote Somali region. It is using its own reserve funds and an early donation from the Government of Norway to support emergency water supplies, alongside other vital health and nutrition programmes. But much work still remains to be done.

"We got early warning of this drought, so we have been able to move quickly and set early plans in motion," says Björn Ljungqvist, UNICEF Representative in Ethiopia. "But the main challenge still lies ahead of us."

UNICEF Ethiopia currently needs more than \$8 million to fund life-saving schemes across the Oromiya and Somali regions, from paying for more emergency water tankers, repairing broken down pumps to providing new boreholes and immunizing 1.5 million children against measles. More than twenty per cent of the child deaths in the region's last major drought in 2000 were linked to measles.

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Diarrhoea is a major threat, and sanitation and hygiene promotion is a major part of UNICEF's planned intervention. UNICEF is appealing for \$16 million for the Horn of Africa as a whole.

Livestock dying



More than seven hours drive up the road from Moyale is Goraye, a small settlement perched on the edge of the crater of an extinct volcano.

"We are losing about 200 or 300 animals every day," said Yatani Ali, a 42-year-old father of two who makes his living through his herds.

"We have not had such a drought for the past five years." Yatani says he has lost 100 goats, five cows and four camels – more than a fifth of his

total livestock – since the failure of the last hagayya rains, which should have fallen from September to December.

These days he is more worried about the health of his two children, aged four years and three months.

"People are facing a lot of problems. They are not getting a proper diet. Last week we had a lot of children with diarrhoea."

A few kilometres from the top of the crater in Goraye, the non-governmental organization Care is constructing a new borehole to help pastoralists.

Until that arrives, Yatani is holding out for the next rains, expected in April. "More rain and God's help are the only things that can help us," he says with resignation.