

SOMALIA: Drought bites southern region

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Nourir Yusuf Ahmed at an IDP camp near Wajid, southern Somalia.

WAJID, 30 Jan 2006 (IRIN) - It took eight days for Nourir Yusuf Ahmed and her family to walk the 115 km from Lahello village to a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) near Wajid town, southern Somalia.

"Our village was dependent on agriculture," Ahmed said. "But after bad rains for the last four seasons [two years], we have depleted our grain stocks. We have nothing left."

Leaving all her belongings behind, Ahmed carried only water cans for the journey southwards. "People with animals had left earlier, towards Ethiopia," she added. "Now, there is nobody left in the village I came from."

Life in the IDP camp, however, was just as tough. To earn some money to buy food for her family of seven, Ahmed collected firewood in surrounding areas to sell in the market.

"We eat one time a day. It is not enough," she said. "Most of the time, me and my husband do not eat at all."

Water points drying up

In the large water catchment area just outside Isdorto village, 44 km north of Wajid, three goats searched the dry, parched earth for water.

Their efforts were in vain, however, because the water basin had dried up 70 days ago. According to Mohamed Adam Mohalim, chief of the Hadame Kamisle clan, one of the major clans in the Bakol region, the basin has dried up only three times over the past 80 years.

Now, the closest water point is 25 km away.

The current crisis is primarily due to the failure of two consecutive rainy seasons, compounded by ongoing insecurity. According to Stephan Vaugon, programme development manager for World Vision, the last rainy season yielded only 8 mm of rain in Bakool, compared to an average of 250 mm.

Widespread crop failure, resulting in the lowest cereal production in over 10 years, considerable livestock deaths, rapidly increasing cereal prices, abnormal population movements and extreme shortages of water and food have been the result.

"Every child [at a supplementary feeding centre] in Isdorto is below 80 percent weight for height. You can see the physical signs of malnutrition," said Bob McCarthy, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Somalia emergency officer.

"It is a borderline situation, and more and more children are slipping into this category," McCarthy added. "Aid workers told me the numbers are rapidly going up."

According to the Food Security Analysis Unit (FSAU) of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, an estimated 1.4 million people are currently in urgent need of humanitarian assistance in southern Somalia.

"If we the delay the response, there will be more livestock deaths, wells will have dried up, and the rate of malnutrition will be very high, with mass movements of people," warned William Desbordes, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in south and central Somalia.

Increasing numbers

In Isdorto, Adey Mohamed Nur, a 20-year-old widow, had just been admitted to the supplementary feeding programme. Her 10-month-old baby Rachema was showing worrying signs of malnutrition.

"I had reduced milk, and one month ago Rachema stopped breast-feeding and had continuous diarrhoea," Nur said. "My other child is sick, too, but Rachema is worse."

The harvests, she added, had failed for the past two years and her community had no grain reserves left.

"My child is dependent on what I eat, and I'm not eating anything," said Nur's friend Mushlima Washame Ahmed, who had also been admitted to the supplementary feeding programme.

"The problem is water. There is no water at all," said Ali Nur, project manager for International Medical Corps, an NGO. "The animals have started to die. The only way to keep these children alive is supplementary feeding."

The number of malnourished children admitted to feeding programmes, he added, had more than doubled in Bakool district since December.

In Hudur locality, the number of children had increased from 89 in December to 225 in January; in Rabdure locality, from 66 to 230. Early estimations for Isdorto indicated that another 600 would be admitted, in addition to the 662 registered in December.

"Things are deteriorating wherever you go in the Bakool region," Nur noted. "Some mothers with children travel for days to get here. Some come from as far as the border with Ethiopia - 75 km on foot."

However, Christine Mwongera, outreach nurse for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF-Belgium) said that while the number of severely malnourished children they had received so far was not as high as expected, the situation is precarious. "People are using their last resources right now," she observed. "From here, it can get worse very quickly."

In the medical centre in the town of Wajid, the impact of the drought was starting to be felt. "Patients with drought-related illnesses started to come in the last week of December," said Fatima Ali Warshel, head of the clinic. "We have treated 60 to 80 [such patients] since, and 25 pregnant women with anaemia [a blood disorder, caused by malnutrition, that results in a decrease of the number of healthy red blood cells in the body]."

"The drought compounds what was already a dire humanitarian situation and is affecting communities in areas beset by years of high malnutrition and morbidity rates, chronic food insecurity, clan fighting and suffering from consecutive bad harvests," said Maxwell Gaylard, UN humanitarian coordinator for Somalia.

Jacob Omar, a pastoralist, had just sold some camel milk on the market in Wajid. "If you don't eat one day," he said. "It is bad. If you don't eat the following day, the second day is worse, because you are already weak."

Omar said most of the water catchment areas had dried up and cattle had started to die. Goats and camels were still able to cope, as they are more resistant to drought. "The dry-spell has only just begun," he warned. "It will get much worse."

Coping mechanisms

Already used to a harsh and unpredictable environment, Somalis engage in a range of coping strategies to mitigate the impact of the drought.

According to Ibrahim Conteh, head of programmes of the World Food Programme (WFP) in south and central Somalia, the first response when faced with adversity is the use of strategic food reserves, followed by the selling of assets, such as cows and goats.

Another common strategy is to migrate, Conteh added. Pastoralists move to areas with more water and pasture, while agriculturalists go to towns in search of casual labour or assistance from relatives.



Dry water catchment area in Isdorto village, near Wajid in southern Somalia.

McCarthy observed that many pastoralists had moved to the river valley in Lower Juba, even though the region was infested with tsetse flies.

"The fact that they are going there in great numbers - knowing that they will lose many of their animals to disease - illustrates the degree of deprivation people are facing," he noted.

In the final stage of destitution, Conteh added, people drastically reduce the variety of their food intake and - ultimately - cut back on the amount of food they eat.

According to Conteh, the latest food security assessment indicated that the situation was serious in some places. "The destitution is very, very bad at the moment," he

said.

International response

Although aid agencies are preparing for an emergency operation, most have not yet moved beyond their regular mitigation activities. As a result, the ongoing programmes are coming under greater pressure as the number of people in need rapidly increases.

"We need to ratchet up our assistance. The next six weeks are going to be decisive," McCarthy noted. "Last year, half a million Somalis needed food aid, now there are 1.4 million."

A major problem, given the scale of the emergency response that was needed, was the delay in funding and the limited presence of aid-agencies on the ground in Somalia.

The UNICEF emergency coordinator was optimistic that a timely response was possible, however, given the shared sense of urgency among the UN, Somali authorities and international agencies.

"We need to deliver food to the populations most in need, including specialised care for malnourished children," McCarthy noted.

Another priority was to increase communities' access to water in a strategic way. Aid agencies were repairing existing water facilities, deepening shallow wells and purifying water resources, taking into account existing clan differences and community water management structures.

In the area of health, measles, diarrhoea, malaria and respiratory infections were key and had to be looked at in combination with malnutrition, McCarthy noted.

"Malnutrition increases the vulnerability of children to these diseases, which are responsible for 50 to 95 percent of deaths among children in emergencies," he observed.

Security impediments

"Good intentions in Somalia can have negative consequences," McCarthy cautioned. Because assistance can be manipulated or create a "magnet effect" that could potentially lead to conflict, he called for a cautious approach that guaranteed the involvement and commitment of local authorities in providing assistance.

According to aid workers, general insecurity and a breakdown of law and order had also complicated a timely humanitarian response.

Conteh noted that the number of roadblocks had increased in response to the drought as youngsters tried to raise money by levying taxes on passing trucks.

"The number of roadblocks has increased by 20 to 30 percent in many cases," he noted.

On Thursday, a trader who refused to pay at a roadblock near the southern town of

Baidoa was shot and killed, raising tensions between the clans involved as the affected clan called for revenge.

Piracy by Somali militiamen on the high seas had also delayed the delivery of WFP food.

In some of the most food-insecure areas in the southern Gedo district, aid agencies were prevented from giving assistance, as local militiamen had directly threatened them.

"We knew about your movements in the area," a warning letter read. "We could attack the place and kill you or crash the plane by shooting from the hills overlooking the town. We did not want to happen that before giving you a warning."

"The people are already dying in that area, and without a response within the next month or two, the number of dying people will increase enormously," an aid worker said.

"The improvement of the security situation is key for a successful humanitarian response," McCarthy noted. "If the Gu rainy season [from April-June] fails as well, we will see the worst drought in this region in decades."

According to FSAU, 20 percent to 30 percent of cattle in the Gedo region had already died due to lack of water and pasture. To make things worse, early forecasts for the gu rainy season predict poor precipitation across the southern Somali region.