

BLEAKEST MALNUTRITION SITUATION IN SOMALIA IN YEARS, says WFP & UNICEF

NAIROBI, 16 June 2006 – Recent outbreaks of fighting and the worst drought in a decade have pushed many people in Somalia to their limit, creating the bleakest malnutrition situation in years, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF warned today.

Somalia Country Representatives Zlatan Milisic of WFP and Christian Balslev-Olesen of UNICEF said this alarming situation was compounded by the difficulty in reaching the 1.7 million people in Somalia who needed help in the wake of last season's devastating drought.

Current malnutrition rates are acute. At 23 per cent they are well above the 15 per cent that signals an emergency. In southern Somalia, five surveys since January found that one fifth of children under five were so malnourished they needed supplementary or therapeutic feeding. An estimated 58,000 children need targeted feeding but current programmes reach fewer than 10 per cent of these children.

With insecurity and access issues having hindered efforts to expand these programmes, both Milisic and Balslev-Olesen said it was essential that WFP's general food distributions continue without any delay. They called on Somali authorities, donors and others to take urgent action over the next 10 weeks to get food and other assistance through to those most in need.

"August to September is the earliest that we can expect any harvest from the current rains – until then many children and families will continue to have nothing," Milisic said. "And for pastoralists whose animals died in the drought, it means little. For them, recovery will take much, much longer. This is not an optimistic outlook."

Balslev-Olesen said the rising malnutrition rates showed clearly the effects of the drought that hit Somalia and the Horn of Africa when last year's rains failed – made worse in many areas of Somalia because fighting and rampant insecurity blocked access with desperately needed assistance.

"We must act now," said Balslev-Olesen. "The present calm, following weeks of fighting, offers an opportunity that the Somali and international communities must grasp to get assistance to thousands of malnourished children and their families" he added, explaining that UNICEF nutritional supplements for children had to be delivered together with general food assistance from WFP for whole families if they were to be effective.

Milisic said WFP has so far in 2006 delivered 32,000 metric tons of food assistance to 1.15 million people in southern Somalia – the area worst affected by the drought – as well as a further 4,00 metric tons to people in northern areas. Although this in itself was a major achievement in one of the most difficult operating environments in the world, he said WFP and its partners were well aware that more was needed.

Somalia's plight was also slipping out of sight, he said, with the start of the rains in April leading some people outside the country to assume that the worst of the crisis was over. "There is a perception that once the rains start, the drought's effects are washed away – but that just isn't the case, especially for pastoralists," Milisic said.

Though there could be no proper assessment of the rainy season until late June or early July, early indications were not overly promising, Milisic said. "Normal or somewhat below normal rains are what the experts are pointing to at the moment," he said.

WFP needs US\$42 million to give food aid to 1.1 million people in the south for the remainder of this year because of drought and provide the full food basket in its rations including corn-soya blend, pulses and vegetable oil – to prevent a further deterioration in the nutritional status of people likely to remain reliant on food aid for the coming months. And, WFP targets another 1.1 million people in other parts of the country with ongoing livelihood support activities.

So far this year, WFP in Somalia has received generous contributions from Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Turkey, Sweden, Britain's Department for International Development, the United States, the United Nations and private donors.

UNICEF needs \$4 million in additional funding for nutrition and related interventions.

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WFP is the world's largest humanitarian agency: each year, we give food to an average of 90 million poor people to meet their nutritional needs, including 58 million hungry children, in at least 80 of the world's poorest countries. WFP -- We Feed People. Visit our website: www.wfp.org

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