

DROUGHT IMPERILS HORN OF AFRICA

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GOOBATO, Somalia - Hassan Isak Nour's grandfather settled this village in southwest Somalia with the optimism of a pioneer. He plowed large fields, planted sorghum, and dug a 200-foot-wide bowl-shaped hole to capture rainwater. For 57 years, it held water, and the village prospered and grew. But late last year, the water catchment dried up.

For the people of Goobato, 200 miles northwest of the capital, Mogadishu, that meant disaster. The next morning, the village's 400 women began what has become their daily trek to survive. They leave at 2 a.m. to walk 10 miles to the nearest water source, and return home seven hours later, each carrying five gallons of water. Throughout vast sections of the Horn of **Africa**, specialists say a searing drought already is the worst in a decade. Oxfam, the aid agency, says the drought is the worst in 40 years in some areas.

In Goobato, no one remembers a drought this severe. Already, in recent days and weeks, dozens of children and thousands of animals have died in Goobato and the surrounding area from diseases linked to severe dehydration and malnutrition, UN officials and villagers said last week.

"What will happen here is beyond my imagination it is something I don't want to think about," Nour, the village elder, said last week, standing on the rim of the empty hole his grandfather had dug. "Because if we don't receive rain in the next few months, many, many people will die. Everyone will leave this area. The village itself will die."

The United Nations has issued urgent funding appeals for Somalia and the rest of the drought-affected region punishing four countries in northeastern **Africa**, and plans to update its needs next month. Some donors are already considering or committing millions of dollars in fresh aid. The US Agency for International Development has targeted \$248 million in emergency food aid this year to Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Djibouti.

Conflict and lawlessness in the Horn of **Africa** are making it far harder to get aid to those who need it. In particular, Somalia's pirates and warlords are disrupting shipping routes and delaying food deliveries.

In Wajid, Somalia, a dusty, hot outpost 20 miles south of Goobato where wind gusts coat skin and hair with sand and dirt, UN officials say the situation had reached dire proportions. Malnutrition rates have exceeded 25 percent in some areas. Cattle deaths are already nearing 30 percent of the herds and could top 80 percent by April, according to the UN.

"We are getting reports all the time that many people, most of them children, are dying, and that many, many animals are dying," said Ibrahim Conteh, the World Food Program's deputy head of its office in Wajid. "All around us, malnutrition is dangerously high."

Every day for the past few weeks, several hundred people have left their villages and walked up to four days to reach burgeoning camps for displaced people just outside Wajid. The camps are scenes from a subworld of deprivation children caked with dirt running around rows of tiny rounded huts made of twigs and covered with colorful quilts or T-shirts ripped in two, and adults whose legs approximate walking sticks lying down to rest.

"We have water here we thank God for that," said Xadix Abdi, a mother of seven who walked two days to reach the camp. She said seven people, six of them children, had recently died in her village of Marmal "because of the drought."

She said life in the camps also was becoming increasingly difficult as the numbers of people multiply. "It is very, very hot, and we go without food for two, three days sometimes," she said. "Today, if my family or the agencies don't bring food, we will have nothing for dinner and nothing tomorrow."

The East African drought is the latest of periodic severe food and water shortages that have plagued Africans for the past several decades. Emergencies in the last year alone have affected millions of people in Niger and Mali in western **Africa**, and parts of Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania in the south.

But relief agencies are especially concerned about the situation in semiarid regions of Somalia, western Kenya, southern Ethiopia, and Djibouti because of the combination of too little rain for two years and too much violence and insecurity in several areas.

The biggest security problems are in Somalia, which has had no central government for 15 years.

Even in the best of times in Somalia, when there's plenty of rain, warlords often wage battles. But in a time of drought, specialists warn that the stresses of survival will further unravel local power structures, creating new opportunities for havoc from freelance bandits, militias, and perhaps Islamic extremists aligned with Al Qaeda.

"Somalia has been an extraordinarily difficult country for the last 15 years," Christian Balslev Olesen, UNICEF's Somalia representative, said in an interview in Nairobi. "We've had flooding, drought, conflict, war, and general insecurity. But we haven't seen anything like this drought for the past 25 years. . . . The worst scenario is that we might be going into huge drought with some kind of high-scale conflict. And bringing food into a security situation like Somalia for 2 million people is going to be a nightmare."

Last year, pirates hijacked two World Food Program ships carrying donated food. US Navy ships now patrol off the coast, but most shipping companies have refused to deliver to ports in Somalia. That means it takes up to a week longer for each shipment of food to come from the port in Mombasa, Kenya, and then be trucked to south and central Somalia.

CARE, a US-based private agency, last week received a US shipment of lentils, sorghum, corn meal

blend, and vegetable oil in the southern Somali port city of Merca, raising hope that the Somali routes can be used again.

Still, the difficulties over the last months mean the World Food Program in south and central Somalia doesn't have enough food to go around. For the next two months, it will distribute just half of its normal food rations to families, and it won't reach vast numbers of people because they live far from distribution points.

Fifteen miles north of Wajid, Habiba Hassan, 70, trudged out of a failed field of sorghum toward her village of Beniday, 6 miles away. With weathered and dusty fingers, she had tied ropes around the yellow-white stalks and then looped the rope over her forehead. The bundle rested on her curved back.

"No one is going to survive out here unless they bring water," she said. "I am 70 years old now, and the temperatures are getting hotter and hotter as the years pass by. We cut down trees so we can make some money from charcoal, but those areas where we cut are turning to desert."

She said everyone in her village knew the reason for the drought.

"It's global warming," she said, adding that villagers had learned much about the potential effects from climate change from radio programs aired on BBC's daily Somali service. "In the past, this season was very hot during the day and cold at night. Now the temperature seems to be equal day and night. At night, we have to sleep outside, it's so hot."

In nearby Goobato, a village with no cars, no motorcycles, no bicycles, no generators, no televisions, no mobile phones, and dozens of \$5 radios, Nour, the village elder, said increased temperatures bake the soil. He said one good soaking rain three decades ago would result in a field of 10-foot-high sorghum, a grassy grain that is one of the foundations of their diet.

Nour also said villagers share the blame: "We cut trees just to survive, but we are part of the problem."

At a recent emergency meeting, village leaders agreed to ask an aid agency to dig a borehole and pour concrete in the water pit so that the rain would not seep out. But both requests probably will not be fulfilled soon; a borehole can cost more than \$100,000 and recent attempts to drill wells in the area here have failed because of high salinity content.

Andrew Sisson, the Somalia mission director for USAID, said in an interview in Nairobi that American emergency help could substantially increase if the situation worsens. The European Union also is considering a boost in emergency aid, and Australia committed an additional \$5 million last week in drought assistance for Somalia and Kenya.

The US National Security Council in Washington has recently focused on the regionwide drought threat, Sisson said in an interview in Nairobi. "They are concerned about a humanitarian impending disaster and also concerned about underlying conditions that continue to generate food insecurity quite often," he said.

Nour knows that without rain soon, Goobato faces catastrophe. In the last few weeks, 140 of the village's 500 families have left, and many more are thinking about going soon.

He has his own concerns. Two days before, two of his four children started vomiting violently. He rushed them to a nearby clinic. Five children and one pregnant woman have died here in recent weeks because of the drought, he said.

"My children were in critical condition, but they are a little better now," he said. "Still, I worry. We all worry."

John Donnelly can be reached at donnelly@globe.com.

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