

On the brink of famine

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Nairobi—More than 6 million people across East Africa are facing starvation in a worsening drought that has already killed at least 80 people and destroyed nearly half the livestock in some areas.

Charities and non-governmental organizations working in five countries in the region are making a desperate plea for donations.

"At the end of the day, if nothing is done now, six months from now we'll start using the F-word, which is famine," said Mohammed Qazilbash, program manager for emergency operations with **CARE International in Kenya**.

Five cycles of failed rain have led to crippling conditions in northeastern Kenya and southern Somalia, as well as severe water and food shortages in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.

"This is something I have never witnessed in my life," said Margaret Mwaniki, East African co-ordinator for Caritas Internationalis.

A farmer herself, she said she lost all of her bananas and the cereals she planted dried up so profoundly she wasn't even able to harvest enough seeds to plant again.

"If I was relying on that farm, what a disaster!" she said. "What would I be feeding my children?"

Water levels in Lake Victoria have plummeted to the point some Ugandan fishermen have given up their trade.

In Tanzania, low water levels mean there is not enough hydro-electricity to meet the country's needs.

Planned power outages have left cities without electricity for 12-hour stretches.

Across the region, nomadic herders have simply watched their animals die of starvation or thirst.

Carcasses line roadways and there is grave concern for Kenya's famed wildlife, struggling to find water.

The horizon is bleak and brown, with a few thorn trees and a type of plant poisonous to cattle providing the only green. Even cacti have wilted and withered.

Initially, hospitals began treating patients for dehydration and eventually reported a few deaths from the condition. Then malnourished children began showing up, usually coupled with other illnesses, like malaria or diarrhea related to drinking dirty water.

Agencies like Oxfam and **CARE** have attempted to help, using rations dropped at designated food distribution centres.

Serious malnutrition cases, caused simply by not getting enough to eat, are expected to hit hospitals now.

"There's just not enough support right now for (emergency) feeding centres," said Peter Smerdon, spokesperson for the United Nations' World Food Program.

In Kenya alone, the World Food Program is feeding 3 million people, plus another 500,000 schoolchildren.

That requires 395 million tonnes of food, at a cost of \$225 million (all figures in U.S. dollars).

So far, only \$36 million has been donated, including \$17 million from the Kenyan government, \$15 million from the U.S. and \$1.3 million from Canada.

The World Food Program is already facing a food crisis in southern Africa, where 12 million people in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe are facing starvation due to poor rains. The situation is only expected to get worse, since long-range forecasts predict that the usual rains in April will also fail.

"If that happens, it will be a disaster," Smerdon said. "That will mean an even larger number of people going hungry. Even if it rains, unless they're brilliant — which they haven't been for the past few years — everyone will have lost their cattle anyway." Government estimates suggest 50 per cent of cattle in northeastern Kenya have already died and another 80 per cent in southern Somalia have starved to death.

A child malnutrition survey conducted in October found that up to a third of all children under five were suffering from acute malnutrition.

"Whole communities are entrapped within this whole circle of drought," **Qazilbash** said. "They cannot move out of this circle because the distances are so vast and there's a potential for conflict."

Alarmingly, aid agencies report deaths of donkeys and camels — two hardy animals accustomed to severe desert conditions.

"You start to imagine that things are going to get a lot worse before they get better," **Qazilbash** said.