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**HEADLINE: Drought comes again to East Africa, but residents and governments remain unprepared**

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BODY:

Babies in East Africa are starving again.

They lay in battered beds with their skeletal mothers beside them and IV drips to rehydrate and feed them. Their cries are barely audible for now, but their woes won't end when they have gained weight. All of their families' wealth is gone their cattle and goats are dead.

When drought comes to East Africa, the very young and the very old are the first to suffer. But according to the latest U.N. figures, they are only the most visible of 11.5 million East Africans who don't have enough to eat.

Hunger comes to Africa for reasons as diverse as its 52 countries. In some, plagues of locusts destroy crops without warning. In others, government policies wreck the agricultural economy.

In East Africa, which includes Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, drought tips the balance. It arrives every few years, usually predicted months in advance.

Drought does not have to cause hunger, but inevitably it does.

Breaking the cycle wouldn't take much: just the vision and enough money to provide clean water, distribute electricity and build some roads.

Cattle are grazing the suburbs again.

The first thing the herders of the Kajiado clan of the Masai tribe do when drought comes is head north to the city of Nairobi, just as they have done for hundreds of years to keep their cattle alive.

The Masai gave Nairobi its name, which means "the place with cool water." When British engineers were planning a railway from the coastal town of Mombasa to what is now Uganda, they chose the Masai's emergency watering hole as a watering point

for their steam engines and it eventually became Kenya's capital.

Even though the Nairobi river is now seriously polluted and barely a trickle, the Masai still come, herding cattle down busy streets to graze in the medians or any open place that may have grass or garbage to eat.

The hungry in East Africa are rarely found in the big towns. They are usually nomadic tribesmen who, against all odds, maintain their traditional ways of life, walking their animals through the semiarid lands no one else has any use for.

Their livestock is the only thing of real value they own and their source of pride.

Their homes in Kajiado district, 100 kilometers (60 miles) to the south, are almost abandoned now. The few young men who stayed behind use shovels to dig 20 meters (65 feet) into dry river beds to reach the water table and then pass up buckets of water for the cows too weak to move north.

It's not enough. The cows in the market can barely stand as they wither before their owners' eyes. When they can no longer stand, they are slaughtered and the meager meat is sold for as little as US\$3 (euro2.50).

Moriaso Kasairo, chairman of the livestock market in Bissel village, said most herders have lost more than 90 percent of their animals for lack of water and forage.

"Most of the people have left the rural areas and moved into the urban areas in search of food, but they still cannot get it," he said. "We normally have enough land here, but it is all dry now."

Cliches are hitting the headlines again.

Starving Africans almost always attract world attention and U.N. and humanitarian agencies seize the fundraising opportunity.

"Millions at risk from East African famine," "Aid Group Warns of Famine in East Africa," and "East Africa faces famine crisis," are just some of the recent newspaper and Internet headlines. But famine and hunger are not the same thing, and while the word "famine" grabs attention, the problem is not lack of food. It's lack of money.

Nicholas Haan, a top expert on East Africa for the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, said that technically famine is defined this way: More than 10,000 have starved to death and a society's ability to cope has broken down.

Another myth is that the hungry are pitiful, helpless and dependent on the rest of the world. That, Haan said, is far from the case.

"Be it Kenyans, Somalis or Ethiopians, these are not passive victims," he said. "They are incredibly resilient people, and they do everything they can to maintain their livelihoods, and they don't want to be dependent on relief aid."

International donors are handing out millions again.

The U.N. World Food Program is asking wealthy governments and foundations for US\$1.8 billion (euro1.5 billion) to feed 43 million people across Africa in 2006.

The U.N. Children's Fund has asked for US\$16 million (euro13.4 million) to help feed starving babies and their mothers in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia alone.

Ethiopia's government, U.N. agencies and aid groups have appealed for US\$166 million (euro138.94 million) in emergency assistance for that country.

International donors will receive dozens of additional appeals for hundreds of millions of dollars for other aid programs before the year is out.

In response to the alarm, the European Commission Humanitarian Organization, Britain's Department for International Development and the U.S. Agency for International Development will start writing checks. Many of the U.S. government's checks will go to U.S. farmers to ship food to Africa.

Romano Kiome, the top civil servant in Kenya's ministry of agriculture and an expert on African crops, said the last thing Africa needs is U.S. grain. When it arrives, the price of locally grown cereals will collapse, hurting African farmers.

"We have enough in the country to feed the hungry," Kiome said.

But nomadic people are too poor to buy it and too far from roads, electricity and clean water to make enough money in good years to cushion them when drought strikes, Kiome said. What his government needs is money to buy food from their own farmers and to transport it to the needy not boxes of goods marked "Gift of the USA."

"I know Americans feel very gracious that they are contributing food to us, but in my view, it is immoral," Kiome said. "It is immoral to only respond when people are dying. Instead, there should be a long-term plan so that this does not happen."

People in T-shirts splashed with logos are handing out food again.

If images of starving babies set off the alarm, photos of food being unloaded and handed out creates the impression that the emergency is over.

Dozens of international organizations specialize in providing the labor and logistics to deliver hand outs.

**Dan Maxwell, the deputy regional director for Atlanta-based CARE International in East Africa, has seen many droughts and warns that this year's may be one of the worst if the rains don't return in March and April.**

**He is frustrated that more has not been done to break the cycle of suffering.**

**"Every time there is a big emergency, there is a lot of talk during the emergency about addressing the underlying causes of these things," he said. "But as soon as the images disappear from the media, all of that talk dissipates really quickly."**

**As the new drought struck, CARE was just starting a project, funded by the U.S. government, to develop an integrated program to help nomadic communities deal with drought. Experts had begun working with them to**

**improve livestock health and marketing, and to provide more education and health services.**

**But with people and animals starving, he said, the emphasis must turn to providing immediate, life saving assistance.**

**Maxwell said he feels "a combination of frustration that we can't seem to get a handle on this, but a determination not to get cynical about it and think we're not making progress."**

Long-term solutions have been ignored again.

Every aid worker agrees that while the world is good with emergencies, it falls short when it comes to providing money for the long-term solutions that everyone knows are necessary to stop the cycle of drought-hunger-emergency response.

When an emergency strikes, money intended for development projects is diverted to immediate problems, the projects are never finished and the cycle continues.

Haan, the U.N. food expert, said aid workers call it the "relief trap."

If Western and Asian countries can deal with cyclical droughts without loss of life, so can the nations of East Africa, with the right kind of help.

The solution is as simple as an ancient Chinese proverb: "Give a man a fish; you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime."

"Drought is a trigger, not a cause," Haan said. "Drought will come and go, unless we deal with the issues of governance and sustainable development in these areas we can be sure these crises will come back to us."

The United Nations advocates a two-track approach to guarantee that there is money to provide immediate assistance without dipping into funds for intermediate and long-term solutions, Haan said.

Intermediate solutions include drilling water wells and helping nomadic herders adopt modern agriculture and livestock practices so they can join the cash economy. Long-term solutions require that herders in semiarid areas find other livelihoods and limit the number of animals they raise.

Samare Kisipan, 33, has gone to school, owns land and operates a business in Kajiado. As a Masai, he understands the importance of cattle to his culture, but he also knows that the traditional ways can no longer be supported. Although he has never met anyone from the United Nations, he agreed with Haan wholeheartedly.

"In the past the land was spacious, but now the land has become small," he said. "Conditions are forcing us to change. Now all of our cows are gone and we have to find a way to continue to exist."

Until this happens, there will always be a next time.

Babies in East Africa will be starving again.