

Drought Sparks Food Shortage in Africa

By ANTHONY MITCHELL, Associated Press Writer

DENAN, Ethiopia -- Two months ago Ayan Abdi struggled to tell her newborn twins apart. Tragically, she has no difficulty

The skin of her malnourished son Nemo stretches tightly over his tiny skeletal frame, while his sister Asma still retains a healthy glow. Her husband, who earns \$7 a month selling firewood, is so weak from malnutrition herself she can produce only enough

ADVERTISEMENT Millions are at risk of famine in eastern Africa after a potentially devastating drought wiped out this year's harvest. Unless urgent supplies of food, water and medicine are delivered to the region, more people could die. The drought, which killed nearly 100,000 in Ethiopia alone.

"People will die because we are already too late with our help," said Abdullahi Ali Haji, the government's health officer in Denan. "Our warning that without immediate help a famine will soon follow."

Preliminary assessments show those affected by the drought include an estimated 3.5 million in Kenya, 1.75 million in Ethiopia and 1 million in Djibouti.

Poor rains over the last nine years have left many families living on a knife's edge. This year the rains failed completely in many areas, and in some areas only 10 percent, while the value of prized livestock has plummeted, hitting hard the nomads who rely on cattle, sheep, goats and

The warning signs of famine appear long before it takes hold in this corner of Ethiopia, about 870 miles southeast of Addis Ababa. In the area, rotting carcasses of cattle mark the landscape. Children, whose immunity systems are hopelessly compromised by

The handful of malnourished children that used to be brought to Haji's hospital in Gode, about 50 miles southwest of Denan, are

The two doctors assigned to cover 1 million people in the region are totally overwhelmed. They have just a handful of antibiotics and a few treatments for diarrhea from drinking dirty water.

"As ever, women and children will bear the brunt of this disaster," said Bjorn Ljungqvist, the U.N.'s Children's Fund Country Director.

Aid agencies do not have money to buy food from districts with surplus harvests to feed those hit by the food shortages. The World Food Program.

"WFP is short \$44 million now to feed 1.1 million people because of the drought," Smerdon said in Kenya on Tuesday. "We have no stockpile of food to distribute in drought affected areas by the end of February."

Efforts to help the region's hungry have also been troubled by a low-level conflict between the Ethiopian army and separatist forces. Trucks carrying food aid have been attacked and, in some cases, burned.

Violent clan disputes, a spillover from the feuding warlords in neighboring Somalia, have deterred aid workers and the

"We have received nothing," said Aden Abdi, who has nine hungry mouths to feed in the wind-blown town of Kelafo. The town is on the Shebelle River, which at this time of year can be as much as 65 feet wide, is now easily traversed by foot.

"We have been forgotten," the oval-faced woman sighed, sitting outside her one-room stick shack where her family struggles to survive. "I don't care if we live or die, as long as they don't see."

In Kenya, however, British International Development Secretary Hilary Benn met President Mwai Kibaki on Tuesday to discuss the crisis, according to a statement released by the president's office.

One-third of the money will go to dealing with food shortages and the remaining two-thirds will go to providing water in

In Ethiopia, one aid group has been working on a project to help cattle herders develop ways of coping with drought in

The project, developed by the U.S.-based aid agency CARE with funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development, aims to provide access to land when a crisis develops, provide a market so they can sell part of their herds and supply emergency food.

"We hopefully are going to get away from these emergency responses in the region," said Carey Farley, a program manager at CARE of Nairobi.

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Associated Press Writer Chris Tomlinson contributed to this report from Nairobi, Kenya.