

ETHIOPIA: DROUGHT

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The Disaster

Extreme food insecurity continues to jeopardize the health and livelihoods of a large number of people in Ethiopia. Recurrent drought over the last few years has led to low yielding harvests and an increase in malnutrition levels. The health and nutrition conditions of millions of people has now deteriorated further with the failure of the belg rains (usually in February) to arrive. Immediate action is required by the Government and donors to avoid a major food crisis.

In late January 2000, the Government of Ethiopia launched its annual Appeal for Emergency Food Assistance targeting roughly 8 million individuals and requesting 836,000 metric tons of food, a 21% increase from the 1999 appeal. Mounting evidence now indicates that food insecurity in Ethiopia may cross a dangerous and life threatening threshold before mid year.

Erratic rainfall patterns have characterized the last three years, and the northern highlands of Ethiopia are facing their fourth successive year in which the belg rains have failed. The belg rains are critical for the production of short cycle crops, as well as for the meher season which covers the high yield, long maturing crops of sorghum and corn which are normally planted in late April and are dependent on the residual moisture of the belg rains.

The cumulative effect of the failure of successive belg rains has reduced traditional coping strategies to a point where malnutrition levels are rising. Many households have sold their oxen and other assets and are not in a position to take advantage of the rains even if they do arrive. There are also signs that some people are leaving their homes in search of income and food.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Against this background, the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS), with support from the Federation, carried out an assessment in Kutaber and Ambassel woredas of South Wollo between February 14 and 17. The findings confirmed the seriousness of the situation. Over 45,000 Belg farmers in Ambassel and close to 32,000 farmers in Kutaber are already on the country's Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Commission (DPPC) beneficiary lists for food aid, and it is anticipated that they will continue to require support until June and beyond if the rains fail to materialise. In addition, the woreda authorities identified a further 43,000 farmers in Ambassel and 19,000 farmers in Kutaber who require food assistance because of the recent poor Maher harvest.

Despite the alarming food availability projections, surpluses of wheat, sorghum and maize do exist in the country, and could be made available for local purchase.

Based on an assessment of the food surplus situation and to complement UN and other NGO actions in Ethiopia, the ERCS and Federation have decided against a bulk food intervention and instead are considering a combination of interventions which would address the immediate needs of the vulnerable population in Kutaber and Ambassel. Employment generation schemes (EGSs) are widely used in Ethiopia, with activities such as agricultural terracing, road maintenance, water resource development and environmental sanitation, for instance, providing employment for specifically targeted groups of beneficiaries. ESG's also promote a more evenly distributed income to vulnerable parts of society, reinforcing the assets of vulnerable households, developing infrastructure, and supporting the work ethos of the affected population.

A team consisting of an ERCS senior relief officer, a local consultant, and the Federation's relief delegate have assessed the feasibility of various interventions, focusing on designing a programme that would address immediate needs. Based on their findings, the ERCS Headquarters management has decided to undertake the following specific interventions in Kutaber and Ambassel woredas in South Wollo:

- To establish employment generation schemes that would provide work for a targeted group of beneficiaries;
- To provide at-risk individuals (pregnant and lactating mothers, children under five and elderly and handicapped persons) with blended, fortified cereal as a nutritional supplement in addition to the staple food which is currently being distributed by the DPPC;
- To provide limited agricultural inputs such as seed and fertilizer in collaboration with the FAO.

Needs

The Federation and the ERCS are in the process of formulating an Appeal, and the planned actions outlined above will be further elaborated upon, including detailed needs and a plan of action.

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