

BENEFICIARY NUMBERS TO BE INCREASED: AMHARA REGION AFTER THE FAILED BELG

Field Report July 1997

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Introduction and Background

During the month of June it had become evident, based on the findings of various agencies' assessment missions, that this year's *belg* short season rains had failed or was producing way below average results in most parts of the country. While the relief beneficiary numbers and figures on food aid needs reflected in key documents (Annual Appeal of December 1996; February 1997 Appeal for the Pastoral Areas; May 1997 Update; Relief Plan of Operation, June 1997) released by the central Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Committee (DPPC) did not yet consider post-*belg* needs, field assessments indicated the trend of rising beneficiary numbers.

Regarding Amhara Region, the Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia (UNDP-EUE) recently focused on the eastern, *belg* producing areas (*Field Trip Report: Eastern Amhara Region & South Tigray Zone, 22 June - 1 July 1997, prepared by Ralph Klingele, EUE Field Officer, July 1997*). Subsequently, EUE undertook a field trip (20 - 26 July 1997) to Bahir Dar, the regional capital, and to South and North Gonder Zones, where some, mainly *meher* (long season) dependent weredas have a history of chronic food insecurity. The other main zones of the region are either known to be surplus producing areas (West and East Gojam, Agew) or difficult to access during the rainy season (Wag Hamra). Unfortunately, also in North and South Gonder the most vulnerable areas are to be found in the most remote and difficult to access weredas. Due to logistic and time constraints the mission was therefore able to visit only one deficit area, Tach Gayint in South Gonder Zone. Information gathering at regional and zonal level was partly constrained due to the fact that some relevant authorities (mainly at the Regional Department of Agriculture in Bahir Dar) were not available or were just in the process of finalising data.

After the mission had concluded its field trip, the central DPPC released (on 1 August 1997) its July Early Warning System Report on "*The 1997 Belg Production and Food Prospect of the Belg Growing Areas of Ethiopia*". In order to avoid confusion, we omitted figures given initially to the mission at regional level and tried to incorporate the latest figures made available at central level in the July Report mentioned above.

44 per cent *Belg* Production Losses: Amhara Region Overview

In the *belg* producing areas of Amhara Region (North and South Wollo, North Shewa, Oromyia Zone, some minor parts of South Gonder) the short agriculture season has generally failed, as confirmed by the regional Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) in Bahir Dar. The Bureau, co-operating with national agencies, had assessed the situation with two teams from mid-June to the end of June during harvest time which was this year more than one month delayed, and has submitted a report to the central DPPC. According to the teams' findings, the *belg* rains started four to six weeks late and were characterised by uneven distribution and poor amount. This led to conditions where only 70 per cent of the ploughed land was actually planted with the main *belg* crops (barley, wheat, peas and other pulses in the highlands; teff and maize, among others, at lower altitudes).

According to the DPPC's July Early Warning System Report on "*The 1997 Belg Production and Food Prospect of the Belg Growing Areas of Ethiopia*" the combined area planted with *belg* crops in North Wollo, South Wollo, Oromyia and North Shewa zones comprises 194,900 hectares whereas the figure for the 1996 *belg* season was 295,300 hectares - a reduction of 25 per cent from last year. While the total *belg* yield last year was 185,800 MT this season the estimated yield according to pre-harvest assessments stands at 103,900 MT. This means an overall 44 per cent *belg* yield reduction over last year. Oromyia Zone apparently suffers the highest losses (91 %), followed by North Shewa (49%), North Wollo (46%) and South Wollo (19 %). Obviously, this lead to considerably increased numbers of relief beneficiaries and food aid requirements. The latest available figures from the central DPPC *Belg* Assessment (July 1997) indicate 609,500 people in Amhara Region will require 52,995 M/T of relief food assistance until the next *meher* harvest due to the failure of the 1997 *belg* crop. Furthermore, some 92,100 people need close monitoring.

The increase in beneficiary numbers is not only caused by the poor *belg* performance. Initial estimates on last year's *meher* main season performance were "partly based on inflated or exaggerated data", as the regional DPPB stated. While general rainfall patterns were exceptionally positive last year leading to a bumper harvest nation-wide, apparently the *kiremt* rains in the second half of the 1996 main season were characterised by relatively poor distribution and early cessation in certain areas of Amhara Region.¹

Consequently, as well as in the *belg* and *meher* producing areas in eastern parts of the region, relief needs in *meher* dependent zones such as North and South Gonder may possibly have to be increased. However, this eventual increment would not reach the same extent as in the eastern zones of the Region, where the *belg* season overall may account for up to 20 to 25 per cent of the total annual production, as stated by the DPPB, while in some weredas and kebeles the *belg* importance is even much more significant. In the weredas of Geramidima Keya Gebrel and Lalomidirna Mamamidir

¹ Driving back from Bahir Dar to Addis Ababa on the "Mota Road" the mission observed south of Debre Werk over a stretch of 15 kilometers hundreds of people of all ages collecting handfuls of grain which had apparently trickled down onto the road from a truck loaded with faulty sacks. The episode, having taken place in the traditionally surplus production area of Gojam, makes one wonder how much food from last year's *meher* people have left in their household stocks.

(North Shewa) the *belg* season amounts to 50 - 60 per cent of annual production while in Legambo (South Wollo) it makes up 90 per cent!

According to the central DPPC's "Relief Plan of Operation for 1997" (released in late June), Amhara Region - with a total population of 15.111 Million - had a needy population of 791,420, requiring a total of 71,812 MT of relief food for the current year. In the Plan, a considerable gap of 30,052.1 MT of food needs remained to be met (as of June). Now, adding the recent number of people to be assisted due to the *belg* failure, total beneficiary numbers for Amhara Region stand at 1,400,920 requiring a total amount of 124,807 MT of relief food, widening the food gap even more.

That a significant gap remains was underlined by the fact that the regional authorities had virtually no more food available to pre-position in the zones and the weredas at the time of the visit. The mission noted (on 22 July) one of the last food distributions in a village between Debre Tabor and Nefas Mewcha (on the "Chinese Road"). According to the Operations Department of the DPPB in Bahir Dar, the region had an allocation (approved by the center) of 45,807 MT relief food for three rounds of distribution (January to September). Of this amount, a total of 39,530 MT had arrived in the region and was subsequently delivered to the zones and weredas for immediate distribution. This leaves a gap of 6,276 MT. While the Department was "writing off" the gaps of the previous rounds (first round January to March 295 MT, second round April to June 341 MT), it was hoping that the current third round (July to September) gap of 5,640 MT may still be met. However, it was pointed out that the relief food, which is provided partly by the DPPC and partly by NGOs such as SPCM, EOC, SCF-UK, CPAR, FHI and ERO/ORDA, has by and large been distributed with nothing left for pre-positioning to meet further needs. This seems to be particularly crucial since the distribution rounds mentioned above did not yet take into consideration the significantly increased needs after the *belg* failure in the eastern zones of the region.

Several anecdotal reports illustrate that the situation might already be very critical in some areas. The DPPB told the mission that in Wadela Wereda (North Wollo) apparently hundreds of people became crippled after the consumption of Grass Pea (also called Chickling Pea or Vetch), a poisonous plant locally known as *Guaya* (*Lathyrus sativus*) of which excessive consumption leads to neurotoxic disorders with finally irreversible crippling effects (*Lathyrism*). Since the detrimental effect of this plant to human health seems to be known to the population, its consumption might indicate a serious deficit situation. Oxfam field findings in the neighbouring wereda of Dawent Delanta confirmed over 500, mainly young people up to 15 years of age, affected by *Lathyrism*.

An overall "alarming situation" in the *belg* areas was confirmed by the Organisation for Relief and Development in Amhara Region (ORDA, formerly known as ERO - Ethiopian Relief Organisation). According to ORDA some people are searching for edible leaves and roots in weredas like Tenta (South Wollo), Geshe Rabel and Geramidima Keya Gebrel (North Shewa). In those areas apparently stress migration was also observed with people having left their homes congregating in small rural centers, selling off their assets (animals and clothes) and hoping for food.

While it is obvious that in the *belg* producing areas relief beneficiary numbers have to be increased considerably after this season's failure, the DPPB assumes the needy population in other deficit areas, mainly in the *meher* depending areas of eastern North

and South Gonder, to be relatively stable. However, the DPPB admits that logistic difficulties hamper assessments of the actual situation in vulnerable weredas - which suffer also from structural poverty - like Adi Arkay, Beyeda, Janamora, Belesa (North Gonder) and Ebnat, Lay Gayint, Tach Gayint, Semada (South Gonder). While some wereda capitals are accessible by car, in the most remote and rugged areas paths are so narrow and slopes so steep that not even donkeys or mules are feasible any more - the terrain permits travel by foot only, while accident rates are reportedly high.

The German Society for International Technical Cooperation (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit - GTZ), which is engaged in development projects (food for work) in deficit areas of South Gonder, twice attempted in recent weeks to reach Semada Wereda but had to give up since the rivers to be crossed through fords were flowing too high. Equally, the zonal administration in Debre Tabor has no up to date information about the current situation in Semada due to the lack of access. Although development oriented, GTZ has recently offered 1000 MT of emergency food to the regional administration out of its buffer stock to help meet the existing relief food gap, which might widen even more if, pending further assessments, beneficiary numbers in the *meher* dependent areas also have to be increased. In a related development, GTZ confirms a relative scarcity of food since grain prices at local markets have risen considerably.

South Gonder: Nothing to worry about?

The central DPPC, in its recent Relief Plan of Operation, indicated a total of 95,980 food aid beneficiaries in South Gonder for the current year, requiring an amount of 9,138 MT (of which 2,457 MT were not yet available). The DPPB in Debre Tabor, the zonal capital, stated that “normal conditions with no alarming indicators” prevail in South Gonder, pointing out that the situation was much worse in 1996 when for the whole year 158,975 beneficiaries were registered. So far in three rounds (up to September) a total of 5,300 MT of relief food was distributed to 66,524 beneficiaries. No extra stocks to be pre-positioned to meet eventual further needs were available.

Asked about conditions in deficit areas, the zonal DPPB admitted “some rumours about some remote pocket areas” were circulating. As soon as access conditions improve, assessment missions would be carried out by the zonal authorities. Such a mission recently took place in Tach Gayint Wereda, resulting in an increase of relief beneficiaries from 10,000 to 29,000 (acknowledged by the regional level). Another study is pending on Lay Gayint, which has currently (according to the central Operation Plan) 15,000 beneficiaries.

The zone is almost entirely *meher* dependent with the main crops being wheat, barley, teff, beans, sorghum and, at lower altitudes, maize. While last years harvest was described as having been “very good”, prospects for this year were called “average”. Rains so far were “normal” and no major pest hazards recorded - if so (like armyworm infestation), problems have been brought under control.

Critical Conditions in Tach Gayint Wereda

Tach Gayint Wereda has a population of about 90,000 mainly living in difficult to access rural areas. The wereda capital, Arb Gebeya (25 kilometers south of the “Chinese Road”), is the only “urban center”. While the wereda committee put the

number of people in need at 33,000, the zonal and regional authorities have, after having initially established a number of 10,000 beneficiaries, acknowledged recently a number of 29,000 (as stated above). The informants available to the mission were not in the position to provide data on food distributions so far, pointing out only that the DPPB had already distributed its share of 150 MT while the NGO Food for the Hungry International (FHI) still had some distributions pending out of the planned total amount of 775 MT. At the time of the visit, no FHI representative was available.

A wereda official claimed that in 14 kebeles (out of a total of 16 kebeles) “very serious conditions” prevail with many people, particularly children and elderly, suffering from malnutrition. This was confirmed by the Arb Gebeya clinic, which had registered some 350 malnourished children under five and some 90 malnourished mothers since February. Reportedly, each of the other six health facilities in the wereda had recorded similar numbers. While initially Fafa was administered to malnourished patients, since May, after Fafa supplies were running out, only Vitamin A and Oral Rehydration Salts were distributed. Nurses visiting households to treat out-patients reported very poor human conditions. Also this mission, driving to and through Arb Gebaya, noted numerous people of all ages of significantly poor physical appearance. Reportedly, in many households no food resources are left and some shepherds, being too weak to walk a long way home, stay in the fields trying to feed themselves on wild food and leaves. According to the administration, so far four elderly adults died due to starvation.

Tach Gayint is entirely *meher* dependent (teff, sorghum, wheat, beans). In 1996 the *kiremt* rains feeding the *meher* crops stopped much too early, leaving crops from mid-August onwards without water, since no irrigation schemes are in place. Moreover, sorghum was infested by stalk borer and wheat affected by bacterial diseases while no chemicals were available in the wereda to counter the threats. These combined factors reportedly led last year to a *meher* yield reduction of 50 per cent (over 1995), severely affecting the food security of this wereda which suffers generally from structural poverty. Stress migration seems to take place to a certain extent. Reportedly, since January up to June this year some 90 people, mostly family heads, had left the wereda in order to seek better conditions as far away as Benishangul and Wollega.

For the current *meher* season the *kiremt* rains had started on time (early June) with the amount and distribution being satisfactory. But authorities in Tach Gayint expressed the fear that the rains might, as last year, stop prematurely leading again to considerable crop losses. Should this scenario become reality, then half of the wereda’s population might need relief food.

Open Questions in North Gonder

According to the central DPPC’s June figures, North Gonder Zone has a needy population of 81,750 requiring totally 7,526 MT of relief food (of which shortfalls amount to 2,992.5 MT). Opposed to that, zonal and regional authorities indicate significantly higher numbers of beneficiaries and food aid requirements.

The current status of relief operations (amounts of pre-positioned, totally distributed, pending and lacking relief food) was not available to the mission since at the time of the visit neither the Bureau head nor an operations officer of the DPPB in Gonder town were available. The latest relief food distributions apparently took place in early July in

the weredas of Beyeda, Janamora and Adi Arkay which, together with Belesa and Wegera, have the highest number of vulnerable people.

The only available DPPB spokesperson stated that beneficiary numbers had “decreased though less than expected” as compared to last year. A major problem he pointed out is the remoteness of the eastern areas of the zone (Beyeda, Janamora, Belesa and parts of Adi Arkay and Wegera). Due to logistic problems, weredas are chronically late reporting their problems to the zonal capital. In some areas the delayed *kiremt* rains (end of June while last year they had started in April) had created problems not only for land preparation but had also resulted in poor pasture conditions. This apparently has affected livestock to a critical extent. Reportedly “many farmers have lost animals”, but estimates on numbers are not available.

North Gonder Zone is entirely *meher* dependent, with the main crops in the highlands and mid-highlands being wheat, sorghum and teff, while in the western lowland weredas (Sanja, Metema, Kwara, Alefa) important cash crops like cotton and sesame are cultivated. The Bureau of Agriculture (BoA) in Gonder pointed out that the *meher* cropping season last year produced a very good harvest as a result of favourable rainfall. Conversely, this year the *kiremt* rains had started late and were characterised by uneven distribution and small amounts - particularly in the vulnerable areas along the valley of the Tekeze River east of Mount Ras Dejen, Ethiopia’s highest peak. As a result, farmers in Belesa for instance were not in the position to plant sorghum, waiting instead to plant chick peas in August where feasible (only black soils are suitable). While the BoA has conducted a proper assessment in Belesa, other areas remained completely inaccessible and the Bureau can only suspect similar conditions. Most areas of Janamora for instance are accessible by foot only - not even donkeys are feasible since the paths leading through very steep and rugged terrain are too narrow and difficult. It takes a healthy person on average three days to walk from Janamora to Debark, the nearest market town (on the Gondar - Inda Selassie - Highway). Asked why people from those extreme mountainous areas do not migrate to a friendlier environment, the BoA informant replied: “They might curse their ancestors for having started settlement in those areas, but out of tradition they stick to the ground.”

Aggravating the access problems is the lack of radio communication with areas which need it most. The BoA expressed the urgent need for communication equipment to be installed in Belesa, Janamora, Beyeda, and Adi Arkay in the East of the zone and in Kwara in the West.

Talking about the western weredas it was stated that cash crop production of cotton and sesame could be increased considerably if more agriculture inputs were available. Moreover, the western districts suffer from an insufficient infrastructure (e.g. lack of roads and health facilities) while major malaria problems affect the population.

Armyworm infestation was reported to have occurred in eight peasant associations of Gonder Zurya Wereda and to have been brought under control. On the other hand, fertiliser sales had reached 2,235 MT by July, whereas for the entire year of 1996 sales amounted to about 3,000 MT. Although sufficient supplies are available, it seems that this year relatively high prices were discouraging a number of farmers from buying.

Though it is too early to establish approximate yield figures for this year’s *meher* season, it is anticipated that the yield might be “less than 1996, but more than 1995”. While the actual yield in 1995 was 642,340 MT, it amounted to 797,755 MT last year.

In this context not only rainfall patterns are of crucial importance, but also the occurrence and extent of hailstorms and pests. The BoA plans to carry out further assessments in September.

Conclusion

Of crucial importance is meeting the requirements of people in need. For the whole region, relief beneficiaries numbers have risen to 1.4 million after the near failure of this years *belg* season in the eastern parts of Amhara Region. Moreover, in pocket areas in the western parts (North and South Gonder) the possibility of increased needs later in the year also cannot be ruled out. To what extent the global weather pattern referred to as the “El Niño” episode will affect *meher* producing areas remains to be seen. Already it is being reported from some areas that the *kiremt* rains might not be as good as last year. Moreover, in parts of Amhara Region this year’s general trend of slow fertiliser sales can be observed. Increased prices are partly the reason while some farmers, having been unable to clear last years fertiliser debts, are fearing legal action.

In view of the extreme access problems of some remote areas, it is recommend that relevant authorities look into the possibility of providing radio communication equipment where needed (e.g. in North Gonder) and to carry out a multi-agency assessment mission on cost sharing basis by helicopter later in the year to the most isolated areas of North and South Gonder.

Last but not least, it is suggested that an updated survey on vulnerable groups’ consumption patterns of the toxic Grass Pea (locally known as *Guaya*; *Lathyrus sativus*) and strategies to counter the problem be undertaken. Although the Faculty of Medicine of Addis Ababa University has already done some scientific research (Prof. Redda Tekle-Haimanot), it seems that concerned relief agencies have insufficient information on the current extent of the problem, which might serve as a significant indicator in food insecure areas.

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