

**Parts of Gonder expecting poor *meher* harvest:  
Observations from Ilnat and Belesa**

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**Introduction**

After the failure of the *belg* short season in Ethiopia, concerns are rising about this year's performance of the *meher* main season which accounts for the bulk (about 90 per cent) of the country's annual agricultural production. Particularly, the possible negative impact on rainfall caused by the global weather phenomenon called the El Niño is fuelling fears that unfavourable conditions might negatively influence the main season crops which are of crucial importance to Ethiopia's overall food security.

Data collected by the National Meteorological Services Agency (NMSA) generally indicate that over the last two months in western and central parts of the country the amount and distribution of rainfall has been fairly good while eastern and southern parts suffered from insufficient rain conditions. Amhara Region, which has important productions of both *belg* (eastern areas) and *meher* crops (western and central areas), seems to reflect consistently the national rainfall pattern: while having been satisfactory in the west, rainfall intensity decreased towards central-eastern and eastern areas. In North Gonder Zone this seems to be particularly the case for the midland and lowland areas along the basin of the Tekeze river. Since in these areas - mainly the weredas of Adiarkay, Beyeda, Debark, Janamora and Belesa of North Gonder - even in good years local food production is hardly sufficient to feed the population, very critical conditions can easily develop in below average years.

Without being in the position (some two months ahead of the main harvest commencement) to determine whether this year might indeed turn out to be "below average", the mission decided to conduct spot-checks in traditionally vulnerable areas, choosing Ilnat (South Gonder) and Belesa (North Gonder) as sample weredas. Besides the field visits, which focused mainly on crop conditions - including interviews with farmers met on location, discussions were held with regional authorities in Bahir Dar and zonal authorities in Gonder.

**Regional Outlook**

Primary areas of concern in Amhara Region are - according to the Bureau of Agriculture in Bahir Dar - the weredas of Zekwala in Wag Hamra Zone and Kobo in North Welo. In those areas, due to shortage of rain, reportedly no crop production at all is taking place during the current *meher* season while livestock is in poor condition. Areas of secondary concern to the regional agricultural officials are North and South Gonder - namely the mid-altitude and lowland areas of the weredas of Adiarkay, Beyeda, Janamora and Belesa (North Gonder; confirming assumptions formulated above) and Ilnat, Lay Gayint, Tach Gayint, Semada, Farta and Este (South Gonder).

Rains in these areas - which happen all or partly to be located east of what could be viewed as a "weather boundary", dividing the region into areas with satisfactory and unsatisfactory rainfall - have been of short duration and were characterised by erratic distribution. In the eastern parts of

Amhara Region the *kiremt* rains last normally until the end of September or at least until mid-September but this year had ceased by as early as 1 August in many areas. Moreover, hailstorm and pests (armyworm, shootfly, stalk borer) have been causing additional damage to crops. While at the time of the visit it was too early to establish numbers - an official assessment was to be carried out by end of September and early October - the Bureau of Agriculture anticipates reductions of actual yield over targeted yield, possibly in the range of 15 to 20 per cent for both zones, North and South Gondar. Focusing on the vulnerable areas alone, yield reductions might be significantly higher.

Identifying the current main areas of concern in Amhara Region, both the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) and the Organisation for Relief and Development in Amhara (ORDA; formerly known as Ethiopian Relief Organisation) have priorities similar to the ones stated by the Bureau of Agriculture.

ORDA which is operating in Wag Hamra, North Wollo and North and South Gondar pursuing mainly food-for-work programmes and employment generating schemes (relief activities are carried out by ORDA only in Ibnat and Belesa), also named Zekwala and Kobo weredas as the "worst drought affected areas in the entire region" having no hopes of any harvest at all this season. This statement was made at a time when assessments on the eastern weredas of Gondar had not yet been evaluated or were still pending. However, ORDA is also expecting considerable yield reductions leading to rising beneficiary numbers in the eastern, vulnerable weredas of North and South Gondar. The agency is even rather sceptical about the *meher* production outlook for some mid-altitude weredas in Gojam, normally a surplus producing area.

The DPPB, which is participating together with ORDA and the Bureau of Agriculture in the September/October assessment mentioned above, shares the concerns of the other agencies and says, for instance, that for Kobo a "disaster is looming". With reference to the lowland areas along the Tekeze river the Early Warning Department of DPPB points out that the *kiremt* rains had started very late - not allowing timely planting of long cycle crops - and ceased too early. Furthermore, in the lowlands where the economy is significantly more livestock-based than in the mid-altitude areas and highlands, severe drought conditions led to deteriorating pasture availability. Refraining from presenting figures for the time being, the DPPB anticipates the relief intervention requirements "to go up considerably very soon". This at a time when a significant shortage of relief resources prevails.

While ORDA was - at the time of the missions visit - about to mobilise additional relief resources for immediate interventions in Wag Hamra and North Wollo, the German Society for International Technical Co-operation (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit - GTZ) had already diverted 1,500 tons food from its development programmes into relief distribution for Tach Gayint and Lay Gayint (South Gondar) to support some 45,000 beneficiaries with immediate effect. Prior to this action GTZ had received an official request from the zonal authorities which was subsequently channelled through the regional DPPB. A similar request (also for Tach Gayint, Lay Gayint and additionally Este) was apparently forwarded to Food for the Hungry International (FHI). Given the critical conditions in its area of operation, GTZ will conduct a nutritional survey starting in November.

### **Ibnat: Beneficiary numbers likely to increase tenfold**

Driving northbound out of Bahir Dar on the main road through the South Gondar weredas of Dera, Fogera and Kemkem the mission noted that these areas had been enjoying rather satisfactory rainfall conditions. Farmers met on the fields in Kemkem said that - although last year the situation had been much better - they would expect some yield from their crops, particularly if the rains were to continue for about ten more days. At a location called Berkutemariam (about half way between

Addis Zemen and Ilnat) one farmer's main concern was the fact that he had no land of his own. He, head of a family of five, complained that he did not receive any allocation at all during the land re-distribution exercise earlier this year and that he has to work "as a tenant" on land held by someone else. As a landless farmer he is not taken into consideration in the course of any agricultural extension programme, having therefore no possibility to receive free seeds or other inputs. With food stocks of last year's *meher* having been consumed, he had to take loans to buy food and to purchase seeds. Interest rates are high: on a 10 Birr loan he has to pay back 15 Birr three months after; on a 5 kg grain loan he has to pay back 7 kg after the harvest. Reportedly, a number of other farmers are - without land of their own - living under similar conditions in this area.

Driving further east the mission noted that the area in the immediate surroundings of Ilnat town, the capital of Ilnat wereda, had enjoyed fairly good rainfall so far and even during the visit heavy precipitation took place. It is important to consider the fact that Ilnat town, being located at the western edge of the wereda and at an altitude of around 2000 meters still part of the highlands which enjoy generally more favourable climatic conditions. A few kilometres east of Ilnat town the terrain starts to descend towards the lowlands of the Tekeze river. Accordingly, after about ten kilometres the promising green picture changes drastically presenting a gloomy view of yellow wilted crops. The mission spoke to some farmers in the fields at a location called Gelamatabiya, some 20 kilometres east of Ilnat town, at an altitude of 1700 meters already part of the mid-lands:

The fields, although situated near a tributary of the Tekeze, are bone dry. "We didn't get any rain since August", says one of the farmers while he is cutting some straw-like ankle-high teff. Although the stalks had produced tiny panicles they are bearing no grain. Some friends are helping the farmer "harvest" this food crop turned to hay: "This we can use as animal fodder only", they say, adding that previously they had cut some barley nearby which had also failed to produce any yield this year. One of the men led the mission team to a sorghum field. Here the same situation with the crops stunted and unlikely to produce any yield - the stems, having suffered severely from water stress, are rotten inside. After breaking them apart one can see very clearly the worms eating their way through the plant: Stalk borer. As if shortage of water and pest infestation were not enough, whatever life is left in the sorghum roots is being suffocated by "*gelmit*" as the Amhara speakers call the parasitic weed *Striga hermonithecica*. This weed is currently blossoming all over the sorghum fields in the area. Like a patch-work carpet the purple-blue *Striga* flowers are interwoven with the crop plants. But what might be beautiful to look at puts an end to all hopes of harvest. Other crops are also problematic, for example, "*noug*" (niger-seed - *Guizotia abyssinica*), an oil seed crop indigenous to Ethiopia which flowers from September to October. Any harvest expected here at least? "Well", say our farmers trying to estimate, "maybe from *noug* we can get 10 to 15 per cent harvest."

The men look skinny, but seem not yet to suffer from serious malnutrition. How do they cope? "Last year we had a rather good harvest. So far, we managed to feed ourselves and our families from those resources. But with stocks coming to an end we tightened our belts and are having one meal per day only." An old man, who is carrying a small bundle of firewood along the road and is clearly in very poor physical condition, adds: "For many of us it is even difficult to get one meal in a day." Selling livestock to buy grain with cash seems to be out of the question - even though animal prices are very low, there are no buyers. What remains is the hope that relief food might soon be distributed.

Driving further east beyond Gelamatabiya, on the road leading to the lowlands, similar crop conditions are found all-around. The only promising impression is presented by a ORDA pilot vegetable project where onions, carrots, cabbage, spinach, beet roots and sweet potatoes are being cultivated on a small plot of land near the river where also a nursery for banana and orange trees has been established. People are carrying watering-cans from the river to irrigate the crops by hand. "We have two more of these pilot projects in the wereda", says an accompanying ORDA field officer, pointing out that the projects, started in 1996, are "very successful". He concludes: "As

long as we get water, everything grows here.” For the wilting fields, no irrigation schemes are in place.

Back in Ilnat town, a local ORDA official confirms the mission’s field impressions saying that production in the eastern parts of the wereda this year might be near zero. Out of 34 kebeles in the wereda, which has an estimated population of 190,000 people, 20 mid- and lowland kebeles have been affected by poor rains, according to ORDA. Based on a recent assessment conducted jointly with wereda and zonal authorities, the agency estimates that in Ilnat the number of food aid beneficiaries (currently 10,000; period April to September) has to be increased more than tenfold. Coping mechanisms used by the population facing food shortages are, as confirmed by ORDA, similar to those observed recently by EUE in South Welo (*After the failed Belg, how do people cope? Observations from South Welo* - EUE-Field Report 18-23 August 1997). Livestock selling - rather unusual in this area - has been observed and farmers are even attempting to sell plough animals. However, the potential for generating cash income is limited by the lack of buyers. Similarly limited is the firewood-charcoal trade where, despite scarcity of resources, prices are low. Intake of meals per day has by and large been reduced from normally three to one or less now. Malnutrition is reportedly on the rise - the survey to be carried out by GTZ starting in November (mentioned above) will also cover Ilnat.

### **Belesa: Cutting bone-dry Teff for animal feed**

An assessment similar to the one conducted in Ilnat was reportedly also carried out very recently in neighbouring Belesa wereda which is part of North Gondar Zone. But since the findings were not yet evaluated at the time of the mission’s visit, no results were available. Another difficulty to obtain official estimates on Belesa was imposed by the fact that just in the week of the visit the wereda’s administration was to be moved from Arbaya in the west to the new capital of Guhala in the central-southern part of the wereda which enjoys better accessibility, being linked through a fairly good 40 kilometre road with Ilnat town. There is no all-season direct road link between Arbaya and Guhala; the only reliable connection is through Maksenyit, Addis Zemen and Ilnat.

Whereas more favourable conditions determine the mid-highland (*weyna dega*) areas in the western and some central-southern parts of Belesa wereda, climatic conditions in central and eastern lowland parts (*kolla*) are harsh, being generally characterised by scarcity of rain. These conditions were considerably aggravated during this year’s poor *kiremt* rainy season. Whatever precipitation occurred, was clearly insufficient for normal crop development. Subsequently, crop conditions in central and eastern parts of Belesa developed similarly to the ones described above concerning the areas east of Ilnat town.

The mission drove through Gohala to Zuy Hamusit (20 kilometres north-east). The attempt to go further into the eastern lowlands became impossible, when after another 10 kilometres a deep and wide trench formed the road’s end. Driving through this semi-arid to arid area, the mission noted crop fields here and there - but all in pitiful conditions. As in eastern Ilnat, farmers were cutting straw-dry teff as animal fodder. Not possessing any animals of their own, they expressed the intention to sell the straw to the “privileged” livestock owners. Last year, these same farmers had been able to harvest up to 200 kg of grain for their own subsistence. This season they

expect no harvest of any kind at all. Having sold their fodder-teff, they intended to start collecting firewood. Apparently, in normal years only very poor townspeople engage in this kind of income generating activity. The fact that now more and more farmers are going into this business is, in their own words, a “very critical indicator”. “...we grow teff to eat grain and not to feed straw to animals and normally our job is to farm and not to collect wood”, they say in deep frustration. Similarly, sorghum is not expected to produce any yield in this area, where it is even too dry for

*Striga* to develop. It seems, as in Ilnat, that whatever is left from sorghum is providing a livelihood only to the stalk borer worms. The farmers spoken to were barely managing to get one meal a day, having no food stocks at home. Under these conditions, where unfavourable terms of trade are also affecting the relatively "rich" animal owners, stress-induced out-migration has started. "Every day some people are leaving to look for work in the plantations around Metema, Humera (cotton and sesame) and Jimma (coffee)", the farmers said.

About seven kilometres east of Zuy Hamusit, the mission visited the household of a relatively well-off farmer. In his *tukul*, which houses four children besides the two parents, some food stocks were stored near the cooking area while some chickens were seeking protection from the soaring heat outside. This farmer cultivates teff and sorghum. While last year he managed to harvest around 8 quintals (800 kg) of sorghum, his fields of teff failed due to unfavourable rains and pest infestation. This year he is not expecting any harvest either from sorghum or from teff - mainly due to the drought. With his own supplies from last year's sorghum harvest consumed (and partly sold to buy household commodities), he has recently sold five goats to buy grain on the market. Besides the chickens, he has seven goats left, two plough oxen and a cow. Once the cash from animal sales is gone, he will try to sell more animals. But the man was very sceptical since prices are now very low and potential buyers difficult to find. "This is the worst in the last ten years", he says looking at the children around him, who he managed - on one meal a day instead of two to three in good years - still to keep in relatively good shape so far.

Terms of trade are unfavourable, as mentioned above. The mission gathered some market prices for Hamusit and Guhala: While the average teff price per quintal (100 kg) in 1996 was 180 Birr it dropped to 100 Birr for the period December 1996 to July 1997. In August/September this year prices climbed up again to 200 Birr. Similar is the development of the sorghum price: 120 Birr average for 1996, December 1996 to May 1997 40 Birr, June to September 1997 120 Birr per quintal. A sheep or goat was fetching around 100 Birr in September 1996, while now, one year later, it only brings 30 Birr. Despite a scarcity of resources, the supply of firewood has increased through more people (farmers) participating in collecting, bringing prices down: The same size bundle of firewood sold in 1996 for 6 or 7 Birr brings now 4 or 5 Birr.

A sub-wereda official met in Zuy Hamusit town estimates that with an agricultural production loss of "100 per cent" the vast majority of the inhabitants in this area will be in need of relief food support "very soon". He also pointed out that livestock conditions (observed by the mission to be still satisfactory) are deteriorating rapidly and that 50 per cent of the cattle around Zuy Hamusit and in the areas further towards the eastern lowlands are affected by anthrax (Blackleg). ORDA, the only relief agency active in Belesa, has four storage facilities in the wereda (rubbhalls in Arbaya, Guhala, Zuy Hamusit and a storage room in school building in Arbazeguar in the eastern lowlands). But at the time of the visit no more relief stocks were available. The last remaining stocks of 28 tons of wheat and 7300 litres of vegetable oil found in the rubbhall of Guhala were earmarked "for salaries", storekeepers said.

### **DPPB North Gonder Zone: Serious conditions prevail**

The Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Bureau (DPPB) in Gonder anticipates that most lowland areas of the seven historically vulnerable weredas will suffer from food shortages this season. Due to a late start of the *kiremt* rains, crop planting took place with considerable delay - and due to early cessation of the rains, crops are unlikely to reach maturity. An additional hazard were hailstorms in higher altitudes and pests.

As "very seriously affected" (with some kebeles having had no rain at all) the DPPB points to the weredas of Adiarkay, Beyeda, Janamora and Belesa. While in this group highland areas may expect some harvest, the lowland areas would expect "zero", the DPPB emphasises, adding that

even in good years these weredas are chronically short of food. In addition, some pocket areas with critical conditions in Debark, Dabat and Wegera give reasons for concern.

The DPPB, jointly with other government agencies of North Gonder Zone, was about to conduct a two week survey beginning early October in the seven weredas named above, anticipating the need for an immediate start to relief interventions. Beneficiary numbers were difficult to establish. Taking Belesa as an example, which has an estimated total population of around 210,000 the DPPB quoted a wide range of different beneficiary numbers for the current year established at central, zonal and wereda level. For this wereda the pending assessment is likely to come up with a figure near the higher end of the scale. The eligibility of beneficiaries is usually established at the level of the kebele-administration. No zonal guidelines are provided - so selection criteria might vary from area to area, although at wereda level some control mechanism is in place to avoid unfair practices.

For the entire zone of North Gonder authorities already anticipate significantly increased beneficiary numbers. While in the current period (April to September 1997) a total of 117,695 food aid beneficiaries are registered this number could more than triple, the DPPB estimates. Pending detailed findings, support might be needed with immediate effect covering six, nine or - in a worst case scenario - twelve months. That is a very serious outlook given the fact that the zonal DPPB had in September only 500 tons stocks of relief food left.

In the vulnerable areas traditional coping mechanisms are facing limitations due to, for example, unfavourable terms of trade (see above), the DPPB confirmed. For the western areas of North Gonder - where cash crops such as cotton and sesame dominate the agriculture - the DPPB also anticipates a slight decrease of production this year. Although the rains have been satisfactory, they were not as good as last year. Nevertheless, no relief needs are expected in those western areas which do, however, produce also some food crops.

Unfortunately the mission was unable to obtain information from the Bureau of Agriculture (which was closed during the time of the visit). From other, informal sources the mission learnt of some unfortunate consequences of the major land re-distribution exercise conducted earlier this year which, according to reports, has led to a situation where some farming land lies idle while a number of people, willing to farm, were not allocated land. This situation has apparently led to some civil unrest in certain areas.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to the victims of the failed *belg* season, Amhara Region will inevitably also face the need to support increased numbers of food aid beneficiaries in *meher* dependent lowland areas. As became clear during the field visit, in most cases the vulnerable areas are also suffering from structural deficits and even in good years hardly achieve food self sufficiency.

Although some progress has been initiated by ORDA in Ibnat and Belesa, improving feeder road access within the areas seems to be important - currently few traders, perhaps further discouraged by the lack of local buying power, bother to bring marketable grain from zonal surplus areas to the remote lowlands. Secondly, if large scale irrigation schemes to water traditional field crops are not (yet) feasible, perhaps efforts could be made to further encourage the diversification of crops near the perennial rivers thus allowing a larger number of people to participate in hand-irrigated vegetable and fruit cultivation. In this respect, ORDA's pilot projects described above are a promising start and deserve wider support. Last but not least, the present allocation of farming land in terms of quantity and quality seems in certain areas to pose some problems which concerned authorities might want to look into.

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