

Update on food security in Ethiopia (As of April 30, 1999)

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Highlights

- ❑ Government/FAO figures over-estimated 1998 *meher* season production in a number of key areas of northern Ethiopia known to be chronically food-insecure;
- ❑ The 1999 *belg* season is a failure, seriously impacting food availability in areas of Tigray, Welo, Shewa and Haraghe where the current humanitarian situation is described as "*grim*";
- ❑ Poor performance of the *belg* rains to date may seriously impede land preparation and plantings for the coming *meher* season throughout northern Ethiopia;
- ❑ Rains in the southern and south-eastern pastoral areas in March have helped ease drought conditions; however, critical conditions could again emerge if the coming *gu* rains, due in late April/May, fail or are less than satisfactory;
- ❑ On April 8, the government of Ethiopia raised the total number of people requiring relief food assistance to 3,254,301 - a figure which takes into account some 400,000 people displaced by the conflict as well as up to 700,000 drought-affected pastoralists. The total food requirement for the year is presently 320,000 metric tonnes but this is expected to be raised substantially due to the *belg* failure;
- ❑ The Federal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission reports a poor response to its December appeal for food assistance and urges donors to make immediate pledges and take measures to expedite food aid deliveries.

Situation in cropping areas

Though the main season harvest last year was considered to be one of the best in recent years, with total cereal and pulses production of some 11.69 million metric tonnes estimated by FAO¹, in some critical areas of Welo, Tigray and northern Shewa performance fell well below pre-harvest expectations. This appears to have been largely due to a period of unusually heavy rain that fell in the central highlands late in the main growing season, damaging cereal crops over a large area just before harvest. Also contributing to the emergence of a food security crisis in these areas, however, was a poor performance of the *belg* (short) rains earlier in the year, which reduced local food availability and hampered land preparation for the main season, *meher* crop.

Exacerbating an already precarious food security situation in these agriculturally marginal northern areas, the late commencement of this year's short rains (due in January/February) seriously delayed planting of the *belg* crop which, in some areas, accounts for more than 40 percent of total production. Though the rains finally commenced in March, helping with ploughing and land preparation for the *meher* season, it was too late in most areas for the planting of short-cycle *belg* crops. As predicted by national meteorologists, the rains withdrew again in April and it has become clear that this year's *belg* season is likely to be a complete failure. According to government estimates, around one million people were dependent on a favourable outcome to the *belg* harvest and these will now require urgent relief support until at least the *meher* harvest in November/December.

¹ FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to Ethiopia, 21 Dec. 1998

While the federal government had highlighted the critical vulnerability of Welo and Tigray to food shortages as early as last December, no one anticipated such an early onset of the crisis. As recent monitoring reports from the UN Emergencies Unit and WFP have recorded, with household food reserves exhausted, people from parts of North Welo Zone have been leaving their homes and migrating in search of relief assistance in significant numbers from as early as late February.

A rapid assessment of the North Welo Zone undertaken by the Federal Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) and WFP in March revealed worrying signs of increasing malnutrition and out-migration in the three weredas (districts) of Bugna, Gidan and Gubalafto. The teams recommended the urgent implementation of an expanded programme of relief food distributions, targeting an estimated 388,000 beneficiaries. Earlier assessments by the UN Emergencies Unit point to a gradual erosion of rural assets, a downward spiral of increasing impoverishment and an exhaustion of peoples' normal coping mechanisms, a process accelerated by a series of consecutive poor harvests. This gradual impoverishment of people has been ameliorated to a certain extent by food-for-work and other employment generating efforts in the highlands, but not arrested. A great many farmers in Welo are poorer and more vulnerable to famine now than they were fifteen years ago.

In Tigray, the regional authorities say that despite the fact that 1998 was a relatively good growing season (with 715,700 metric tonnes of crops of different kinds produced according to FAO), chronic drought conditions particularly in the Eastern and Central zones has rendered 373,013 people vulnerable to extreme food shortage. Normally, those facing household food shortage seek employment on the large commercial farms in western Tigray. This migration has largely stopped due to the added insecurity of the area arising from the conflict with Eritrea. While drought is chronic in Tigray (and northern Ethiopia in general), the combination of war displacement and drought, together with the impending rainy season expected (hoped) to begin in mid-June which will hamper or prevent access to many of the affected areas, creates a precarious situation in which timely mobilisation and response to preposition relief items will be essential.

On April 8, the Federal DPPC issued an update on emergency relief needs in Ethiopia. The document highlighted growing concern regarding the early emergence of critical food needs in a number of areas of the country, drawing attention to the fact that this was happening at a time when there had been a less than favourable donor response to the government's December appeal. The low carry-over stocks from last year combined with the low-level of pledging (around 100,000 metric tonnes as of mid-April), was seriously hampering government and aid agency efforts to deliver food aid to communities where the need was urgent. Indeed, the DPPC report it has been forced to reduce the quantity and frequency of rations in some cases.

To further illustrate the seriousness of the famine threat in the north of the country, on April 22 and 23 the DPPC organised a helicopter tour of food insecure areas of Tigray and Welo for a group of selected donor ambassadors (US, UK, Canada, Norway), the head of the European Union delegation to Ethiopia and the WFP Country Director. The group visited a number of locations in Tigray, Welo and North Shewa. The situation in the highlands of Welo, in particular, was described as "grim" with large numbers of malnourished children and adults observed. In most areas it was clear that the *belg* harvest would be a complete failure, affected upwards of a million people who could expect no production until the *meher* season harvest in November/December. Government relief operations to date have been hampered by a lack of resources, management problems and a shortage of trucks. According to NGOs working in the area (principally, Save the Children Fund UK) nutrition level have not improved following the 1998 meher harvest and have now declined below the official government cut-off point requiring an emergency intervention (90 percent mean weight for length). Significant numbers of seriously malnourished women and children were observed by the mission. An increase in mortality was reported from different locations and there was evidence that many people are reliant on famine foods for their survival, other coping mechanisms having become exhausted. Migration of destitute families to urban areas is continuing.

Situation in pastoral areas

The failure of the October/November *deyr* (short) rains in the peripheral lowlands of southern and south-eastern Ethiopia has had the effect of greatly intensifying the current long dry season (*jilla*) in these predominately pastoral areas. According to recent assessments conducted by the UN and federal authorities, consecutive years of drought, exacerbated by chronic insecurity and a lack of basic infrastructure has led to the progressive impoverishment of many people in the periphery of the country. Environmental degradation and the impact of large numbers of refugees and returnees from neighbouring Somalia have been additional burdens. The poor rains in 1998 again had a serious impact on the availability of water and grazing for livestock, but perhaps just as important has been the economic downturn resulting from the ban on the import of livestock imposed by Saudi Arabia on the Horn of Africa following the outbreak of Rift Valley Fever in the region during the early part of 1998.

The Federal DPPC has determined that more than one million people in the lowlands of the Somali and Oromiya regions require emergency assistance during 1999. As part of a wider drought-relief programme (EMOP 5979), in March the World Food Programme announced that it would be providing food aid to 640,000 drought-stricken pastoralists in the Somali region, for which it has reallocated approximately 8,000 metric tonnes of food aid. An additional 8,000 metric tonnes has been allocated to address needs in the lowlands of Borena, Bale and East Hararghe zones of Oromiya. The food aid, sufficient for one-off, one month ration, will be channelled through the DPPC and arrangements have been made with local NGOs for monitoring distributions.

In addition to the food aid component of the current emergency response, a number of NGOs have been working with UNHCR and the regional authorities to augment water tankering operations to the areas worst-hit by the drought. These include the refugee camps and host communities around Rabasso and Camoboker as well as Gashaamo, Warder and Danot. The UN Emergencies Unit and UNHCR are meanwhile working with the regional water bureau in Jigjiga to implement a pilot "water resources survey and contingency plan" for drought-prone areas in the Somali region using existing resources and a cash contribution provided by a donor locally.

The unseasonal rains that occurred in March brought welcome relief to many areas in the south and south-east. The tankering of water that had been contemplated for the Borena Zone of Oromiya was shelved after the rains replenished surface sources and traditional cisterns and led to a rapid improvement in pasture. Though the rains were not as extensive in the Somali region, even here a significant improvement in the situation was noted, helped by an increase in market activity as livestock exports to the Gulf States partially recovered during the Haj season. The normal time for the commencement of the main *Gu* rains is approaching and the situation in the Somali region, which remains precarious, will need to be monitored carefully.

Summary of emergency needs

The appeal issued in December by the Federal DPPC indicated that 2,157,080 drought affected people would require food assistance for some period (ranging from 3 to 9 months) during 1999 added to which was another one million whose situation was considered marginal and requiring close monitoring. Following the conclusion of technical assessments in the lowlands in February/March, the number of drought-affected people needing food assistance was raised by a further 700,238. Including a total of 396,983 people displaced in Tigray and Afar as a result of the conflict with Eritrea, the total revised number of people requiring emergency food aid assistance was put at 3,254,301. In food terms, for the entire year, this translates to approximately 320,000 metric tonnes. The current shortfall, after taking into account carry-over stocks and new pledges, is put at around 200,000 metric tonnes. This figure, however, does not take into account the additional needs that will arise from the anticipated failure of the *belg* this year (in December, FAO estimated a nominal *belg* production of 400,000 metric tonnes for 1999).

Given the alarming reports of famine conditions emerging in parts of Welo, the Federal DPPC have decided this week to bring forward the usual *belg* harvest assessment, normally scheduled for June. Teams made up of DPPC, UN and donor representatives are expected to proceed to the field by the first week of May. Initial results should be known two weeks after. In the meantime, the government is urging donors to consider new food aid pledges and accelerate the shipment of existing commitments. Substantial stocks are held in the National Emergency Food Security Reserve (approximately, 115,000 metric tonnes as of mid-April) but confirmed pledges are required before loans can be agreed. This mechanism has proven extremely useful in the past in pre-positioning food aid in drought-affected areas ahead of the arrival of food aid shipments from abroad. Meanwhile, it is understood that following the high-level mission to Welo and Tigray last week, a number of donors, including the British and US governments, and the European Union are considering additional emergency food aid pledges to Ethiopia. WFP has indicated that it will be submitting a request for a new emergency operation (EMOP) to Rome to meet the food requirements of an additional 813,000 drought-affected people. In addition to 75,000 metric tonnes of cereals and 10,000 metric tonnes of pulses, the EMOP will include 17,000 metric tonnes of blended foods to be used in emergency feeding programmes.

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SOURCES:

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