

# Kenya's food shortages persist as rains fall

Rains have come to the north eastern parts of Kenya, but this alone is unlikely to immediately resolve the food problems facing the mainly nomadic families in the semi-arid region, aid workers have said.

"The rains may be there but that does not translate into improved milk availability, food access and food security," Assumpta Ndumi, a nutrition coordinator for Save the Children, said on Thursday.

## Drought averted?

Locals who have endured a long drought say their livelihoods are threatened and some cannot afford to feed their families.

The price for 1kg of maize meal is now \$1.45, said Mohammed Yakub, an Assistant Chief in El Ram which is a remote village in the drought-prone Eastern Mandera district.

The problem is particularly acute for the pastoralist families, according to James Odour, drought management coordinator at Arid Lands Resource Management Programme in Nairobi.

"The terms of trade for the pastoralists will deteriorate because they will need to sell a lot of livestock to buy small amounts of cereals," he explained.

Following assessments in March this year, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that 180 000 people would require emergency food aid in Kenya's drought-affected areas after poor short rains at the end of 2007.

However, a drought on the scale of 2004-2005 has been averted by the onset of the long rains.

Even so, a study by Save the Children in March showed that one in four children in El Wak was malnourished, a figure 50% higher than the emergency threshold.

## Increase of food prices

Food prices have more than doubled since January this year, Shakri Malim Mohammed, a food trader in El Wak noted.

He attributed the rise to transport problems associated with post-election violence in January and February, insecurity in Somalia (where a large proportion of food in Mandera is smuggled from) and the global food crisis.

"The wholesale price of rice was \$24 for 50kg in January.

"It has become so expensive - it now costs \$58. People are buying much less than before," he said

## **Reduced produce**

In addition to poor food security, Save the Children, emphasised that milk production, an important part of the pastoralist diet, has been seriously reduced because of multiple issues associated with livestock health.

The livestock have also undergone a lot of stress with the droughts, floods and diseases.

According to aid agencies in El Wak, a town that spans the Kenya-Somali border, large numbers of livestock died after severe droughts and poor rains in recent years.

This has reduced the ability of nomadic pastoralists to support themselves and forced many to settle permanently in the vicinity of permanent water sources such as El Wak.

However, due to overgrazing, pasture around such permanent settlements quickly degraded.

Consequently the pastoralists have had to depend on food aid throughout the dry season.

"Many people cannot afford food; but even if they could, no food is available. Normally we can sell a litre of milk in the market for 80 cents but now the price of food has increased.

"Food is usually provided by COCOP [Consortium of Cooperative Partners] but for the last two months there have been no distributions.

"If we look at the worsening droughts every year, we don't think our livestock and livelihood will be able to exist," Mohammed said.

## **Aid agencies urged to assist**

Mandera Member of Parliament Husein Ali urged the government and international aid agencies to help address the problem urgently to prevent loss of lives.

"Prices of maize, wheat flour, cooking fat and sugar have doubled in the past six months ... every family is feeling the pain of the extra burden.

"The government must act now and save thousands of families who cannot afford food ... rising food prices must be arrested [and] relief food allocation increased to cover more families.

"The border [with Somalia] must be opened and cross-border business legalised; the government will earn revenue and at the same time make food available to many families," Ali said.

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