

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issues periodic **Emergency** alerts when a significant food security crisis is occurring, where portions of the population are now, or will soon become, extremely food insecure and face imminent famine. Highest priority should be given to responding to the crisis highlighted by this **Emergency** alert.

Issued: 26 December 2005

Pre-famine conditions confront Somali region Urgent responses required to prevent an alarming escalation of food insecurity crisis

Over 1 million livestock dependent people in Somali Region face extreme food insecurity that includes emerging pre-famine conditions triggered by the failure of the *deyr* rains. The short rainy season (*deyr*) between October and December in the livestock-dependent southern and southeastern lowlands of Ethiopia is critically important to the livelihoods of pastoralists. These rains normally recharge water sources and replenish pasture, thus sustaining livestock through the dry-season from December to April. When the *deyr* season fails, the population in these areas usually experience extremely stressful water and pasture shortages until the *gu* (March – May) rainy season. In recent years, successive droughts, high cereal prices, a livestock import ban from the Gulf States, and conflicts have made the livestock-dependent population highly food insecure and vulnerable to poor seasonal rainfall performance.

According to the preliminary results of the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Administration (DPPA) led multi-agency needs assessment to the region, failed 2005 *deyr* season rains have resulted in a serious food security crisis for southern Somali Region pastoralists. The situation is worst in the districts that had poor rains during the preceding *gu* season (April – May), including Afder, Liben, and parts of Gode zones. The other eastern zones of the region are also facing deteriorating food security conditions (Figure 1).

As a result of the poor rains and fast depleting of pasture and water sources, some pre-famine conditions have already emerged: early and widespread human and livestock distress migrations; tribal conflicts over scarce resources; deterioration of livestock body condition and cases of livestock deaths; slaughtering calves to save cows; a significant decrease in livestock products (e.g. milk); crop wilting in agro-pastoral areas; escalating malnutrition and reports of child deaths; rising sorghum prices (a dominant staple). Such pre-famine conditions at this early stage are alarming, especially considering the onset of the *jillal* (dry) season (January – March/April) in the seven southern zones of the region, a time when food security conditions normally deteriorate to their worst levels of the year.

Drought has also affected neighboring north eastern Kenya where reports indicate a severe shortage of pasture and water and consequent poor physical condition and death of livestock. Kenyan pastoralists are reportedly migrating to southern Somali region in search of pasture and water where some minor showers were reported.

The preliminary results of the DPPA assessment indicate that more than 1 million people will face extreme food insecurity for the first half of 2006. These households are expected to face serious water, pasture and food shortages peaking from January to March.

In response to the deteriorating situation, the DPPA dispatched food aid to the region in December and is in the process of allocating blended food to the people most in need. WFP pipeline information indicates that there will be a carryover stock of close to 250,000 MT of food aid for 2006. Hence, as long as urgent action to distribute food aid is taken, sufficient resources should be available to meet food aid needs.

However, while food aid is the immediate priority to save lives, other interventions are also imperative. Water, fodder provision and health (human and animal) interventions are now equally important. Interventions to protect the animals on which the survival of pastoralist livelihoods is based are critical, especially given the successive losses experienced by pastoralists in the region over the last 10 years. Saving the breeding stock is essential to minimize the impact of the current crisis and to allow post-drought recovery, given the very high dependency on livestock in affected areas. An initial estimate from the regional DPPA office indicates that there is an immediate need of more than 40 million US\$ in these sectors. A large-scale humanitarian catastrophe can and must be averted through a rapid, appropriate and adequate response to the current emergency.

