

FEWS NET will publish a dekadal Rain Watch for the East Africa region through the end of the March-May rainy season, with a special focus on ongoing crises in region. Its purpose is to assess the progress of the current season and its potential impact on food insecurity, which is currently at high or extreme levels in several areas of the region.

## Below-normal rains increase food security concerns in Ethiopia, Djibouti

As this Rain Watch was being issued, satellite imagery indicated heavy rainfall on the border areas between Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia (see circled area in Figure 1). Initial ground reports confirm localized heavy rains, but not as heavy as the imagery indicates. The next Rain Watch, to be issued next week, will address the impact of these rains in more detail.

Continued below-normal March-May rains are increasing food security concerns, particularly in Ethiopia and Djibouti. In central, northern, and eastern parts of Ethiopia and all of Djibouti, rains have been inadequate or too late to support normal crop and livestock development. In most other parts of the region (southern Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, western and southern Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi), rains have so far been normal or above normal, allowing for improved crop and vegetation conditions.

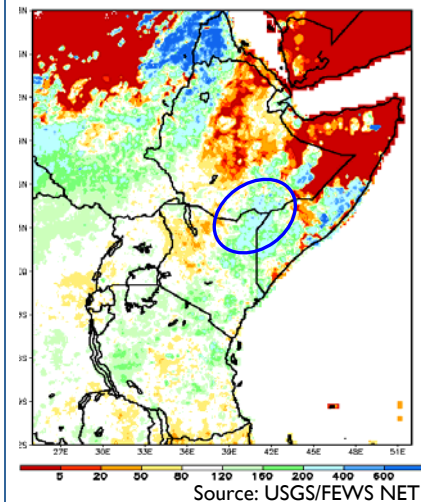
In Ethiopia, late and poor *belg* rains are leading to expectations of a significantly below-average *belg* harvest and increased food insecurity. Only a small fraction of *belg* cropping areas in Amhara, Tigray, Oromiya, and parts of SNNP regions has been planted. And, although *belg* growing areas account for only about 5 to 10 percent of Ethiopia's total annual food production, southern regions of the country, including most of SNNPR, produce their annual food crops during this season. These southeastern lowlands already face a humanitarian crisis, which will deepen if rains continue at below-normal levels. Early indications are that rains have started in parts of these areas, but it is too early to determine their impact on food security. Coffee, the main cash crop, also sets seed during this season, and *belg* rains allow *chat* and other wetland crops to regenerate and mature. The April-May portion of these rains are also important for the planting and establishment of long-cycle maize and sorghum crops, which are harvested from October and account for about 50 percent of total annual cereal production.

A poor *belg* crop will increase the number of people in need of assistance in June/July, when harvests are normally expected. Rising food insecurity due to previous poor seasons and current poor *belg* rains have led the Ethiopian government to appeal for emergency assistance for 2.1 million people. Humanitarian interventions are essential to mitigate current food insecurity and prevent the situation from deteriorating further.

Delayed and below-normal *dira/sougoum* rains in Djibouti are also increasing food insecurity. Serious water and pasture shortages following two successive poor rainy seasons are further exacerbated by the poor performance of the current rains. The negative impacts of poor rains in Djibouti are worsened by increasing staple food prices, high malnutrition rates, and livestock deaths. Assistance to mitigate current hardships and prevent the situation from worsening is needed.

Rains have started in pastoral areas of south-central Somalia and northern and eastern Kenya, alleviating serious water shortages. While it is too early to determine whether these rains will improve existing food insecurity in these areas, forecasts indicate their possible continuation into the next dekad. As April is the peak rainfall month during the March-May season in southern and equatorial East Africa, good rains during this month will have an important impact on crop production and food security in these areas.

**Figure 1.** Percent of normal precipitation in East Africa, 1 March–16 April 2008



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