

Kenya Food Security Alert

May 5, 2011

Failure of long rains in critical areas deepens food insecurity

The poor performance of the long rains (March-May) to date in northern, eastern, and southeastern areas of Kenya is raising serious food security concerns. Food insecurity for an estimated 700,000 people in northern and eastern pastoral areas is likely to deteriorate to Crisis and Emergency levels (IPC Phase 3 and 4) beginning in June. For poor and very poor farming households in the southeastern marginal agricultural areas, food security is likely to deteriorate after July to Stressed and Crisis levels (IPC Phase 2 and 3). Rains during the last week of April through early May in Turkana, Marsabit, and Mandera have eased severe water shortages but have had little impact in alleviating heightened food insecurity. At least 2.4 million people require food and non-food assistance through most of 2011, and activation of contingency planning is advised.

Rainfall performance to date ranges between 10-50 percent of normal, with deficits of 50-200 mm (Figure 1). Severely depleted pastures have caused very low livestock productivity and livestock mortalities up to 15 percent in Mandera, Wajir, Moyale and parts of Isiolo and Tana River districts. Pastoralist terms of trade have declined by up to 50 percent, as maize prices are 60-80 percent higher than the five-year average while livestock prices are 30-50 percent below average, reducing access to food at the household level. Heightened rates of child malnutrition are indicative of a worsening situation. Preliminary findings from a nutrition survey conducted by Save the Children-UK in March indicate that acute malnutrition rates are unseasonably high and above the emergency thresholds (>20 percent GAM in Marsabit in March (WFH, WHO standards), and >25 GAM in Mandera Central). The final report with additional information is expected to be released soon.

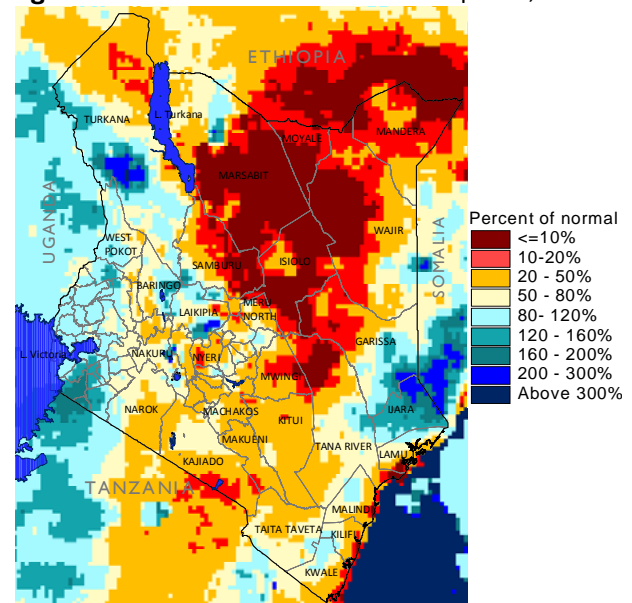
Continued rains expected through the first week of May in Mandera, Marsabit and Moyale will likely delay the shift from the Crisis to Emergency phase, though improved pasture conditions are unlikely to translate into significant food security improvements as the season is close to an end and rains have not been widespread. In addition, most livestock are far from normal wet-season grazing areas and households may not immediately benefit from improved conditions.

Households in the southeastern and coastal marginal agricultural areas of Mwingi, Makueni, Kitui, Tharaka, Kwale, Kilifi and Malindi are also facing a lengthy lean season that is likely to continue through December 2011. While recent rains have provided some reprieve for the short rains-dependent lowlands, crop prospects are bleak. The long-rains maize crop is likely to fail even if the rains continue because the season is about to end. However, should rains continue through May, vegetables and other short cycle crops may ease household food deficits temporarily.

The impacts of the second or third successive season failure in these areas are compounded by a limited response due to severe resource constraints by the government, WFP, and other donors. While dependency on relief food is overwhelming, distributions are erratic – WFP can only meet needs for 1.6 million persons, while the GoK is expected to provide food for the remaining 800,000 people. In reality, severe budgetary constraints, heightened food prices, and an unclear targeting policy suggest that most households will not be reached. Poor and very poor households have few coping strategies left.

FEWS NET is verifying the impacts of the poor rains on household food consumption, livelihoods and coping strategies in affected areas. Impacts of current rains will also be monitored in rapid assessments conducted beginning on May 9th.

Figure 1. Rainfall anomalies: March 11-April 30, 2011



Source: USGS/FEWS NET