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Africa

East Africa in the grip of famine

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As famine returns to East Africa, Norman Traub pins the blame on climate change and imperialist intervention.

Famine was declared in two regions of Somalia on 20th July. This occurs when acute child malnutrition exceeds 30% and more than two people of every 10,000 die each day from hunger. The last time famine was declared in the country was 1992. 3.7 million people, half of the population are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.

A further 8 million people require food in neighbouring countries, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. The drought has been severe across the Horn, with some areas receiving the lowest rainfall for 60 years.

Tens of thousands of people have already died as a result of the drought. Children and women are the most vulnerable. More than 2 million children under five in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia are acutely malnourished, including almost 500,000 children who are suffering from life-threatening severe acute malnutrition.

In parts of Southern Somalia, acute malnutrition rates amongst children are already approaching an unparalleled 50%. The UN is convening an emergency meeting to discuss the response to the drought as its top aid official in Somalia, Mark Bowden warns that the situation is desperate and that it is likely conditions will deteriorate further in six months.

The last two rainy seasons have seen no rainfall in East Africa. This follows a previous five year spell of drought. The climate change caused by global warming in East Africa has led to more frequent and severe droughts in the already dry season and sporadic and unpredictably large rainstorms causing floods, mostly during the wet seasons.

Widespread crop failures and serious water shortages due to the drought have caused tremendous human devastation, decimated livestock and driven farmers and their families off the land. The situation is made worse by high food prices. Nowhere is the situation as bad as in Somalia, torn by foreign invasion, imperialist intervention and civil war. The imperialist backed government is fighting against a fundamentalist Islamic movement, al-Shabaab, in control of mainly the south of the country as well as parts of the capital city, Mogadishu.

Somalia is the most dangerous country in the world to work for aid agencies, kidnappings, killings and attacks on aid convoys occurring frequently. Aid agencies are harassed not only by the insurgents, demanding cash payments but also by US military operations against the rebels, which have disrupted humanitarian operations. Insurgents vowed to target foreign aid workers after a US missile strike killed the head of al-Shabaab and 24 other people in 2008. Al-Shabaab say they will maintain a ban on specific aid agencies that was imposed in 2009 and 2010, in spite of promising to lift it earlier this month.

Tens of thousands of Somali refugees are flooding camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, many walking for 30 days with very little food or water to sustain them and having to bury small children before even reaching their destinations.

In the refugee camps, aid agencies are struggling to cope with the refugees. The UN says it has so far raised only half of the \$1.6 billion needed for its regional relief efforts in East Africa. Within Somalia many starving families are forced to travel to war-torn Mogadishu in search of food. Other countries in the region, particularly Ethiopia and Kenya are facing the failure of rains in pastoralist areas and soaring food prices.

An estimated 20 million people live in the dryland areas of the Horn of Africa; nomads who own livestock and feed themselves and their communities with milk, meat and other livestock products. But in recent decades vast areas of the land in the Horn of Africa have been taken over by agriculture and large scale farms. This has undermined the pastoralist system and reduced yields of milk and meat. In periods of drought many nomads are forced to drop out of

the system altogether.

East Africa depends heavily on rain-fed agriculture making rural livelihoods and food security highly vulnerable to the severe droughts and floods caused by climate change. The small farmers and pastoralists are under attack by capitalist agribusiness. The people are caught in the grip of the high prices of staple foods, mainly imported. In Somalia, plagued by imperialist intervention and civil war, there is the danger of the famine spreading to all the other areas of the country.