News
EarthBeat
A Somali woman and her children stand near the carcasses of their dead livestock

A Somali woman and her children stand near the carcasses of their dead livestock following severe droughts at a camp in Dollow May 24, 2022. Catholic Relief Services is among international agencies warning of famine looming in Somalia. (CNS photo/Feisal Omar, Reuters)

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Amid a U.N. warning that a famine is looming in Somalia, U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services is calling for increased humanitarian support in the Horn of Africa country.

The U.N.'s Inter-Agency Standing Committee warned Sept. 5 that famine was unfolding in Baidoa and Burhakaba districts in southern and central Somalia. The grouping of key U.N. agencies and their partners said the situation may last until March if there was no significant increase of humanitarian assistance.

"With this warning, there is time to save lives," Sean Callahan, CRS president and CEO, said in a statement. "The international community must meet the immediate needs on the ground while also doing a better job at preventing famine in the first

place. We can address the myriad causes of food insecurity, like conflict and climate change."

An estimated 7.1 million people, half of them children, need emergency aid. Millions face acute hunger, the U.N. grouping said, with women -- particularly pregnant and lactating mothers -- and children under 5 most affected.

"Starvation and death are likely already occurring," said the grouping's statement.

Omar Aden, a public health specialist and a humanitarian who is CRS chief of party in Mogadishu, said while he had worked in many difficult contexts, the current one in Somalia was different. He said the sight of camel carcasses strewn across the landscape was ominous.

"Camels are resilient. They are meant to live for extended periods without water -- the last animals to remain standing. If they are unable to survive, what are the risks for families and communities?" he asked.

Bishop Giorgio Bertin, apostolic administrator of Mogadishu, has reinforced the call for increased international support. He said the drought in Somalia and some of the neighboring countries is serious.

"The situation is dramatic in some parts of Somalia, like Bay and Bakol and Hiran. There is the need of an urgent intervention from the international community," said the bishop, who visited Mogadishu at the beginning of August with Sara Ben Rached, director of Caritas Somalia, and the apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Antoine Camilleri.

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"The situation is dramatic also because the most affected areas are controlled by al-Shabab. That is the reason why so many people leave their places to flock into the bigger towns controlled by the government."

He said Somalia needs an intervention coordinated among national and local governments, U.N. agencies and international nongovernmental organizations.

In Somalia, CRS runs multiple programs, including a cash assistance program that helps families buy food and supplies and a program that takes clean water into drought-stricken communities. CRS has been providing feminine hygiene kits for

women and girls and also supporting partner health facilities and nutrition centers.

Although Somalia is most dire, at least 20 million people in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, according to aid agencies. Several factors -- including climate change, conflict and instability, the consequences of COVID-19 and the impact of the war in Ukraine -- have worsened conditions for people. The drought in East Africa has been described as the worst in 40 years.

Fr. Fredrick Wafula, the priest overseeing the Caritas agency in the northeastern Kenyan Diocese of Garissa, said the drought had hurt livelihoods and left the people very desperate.

"When traveling across this region, all you meet is stretches of dry, bare and dusty land. Carcasses of animals and bones are strewn all over," he told Catholic News Service. "The people are in constant ... search of water or pasture, but the weak animals and the death make it difficult for them to move."

"Some finally make it to the river basins, where there is some little grass, but for some, it gets late," added the priest, who said Caritas' response to the crisis has been limited due to a lack of funds.

Wafula said children have to quit school early, join parents in search of food and water or stay at home to wait for food.

"My experience is where there has been a feeding program, school enrollment and attendance has been rising," he said.