News
EarthBeat
A woman drives donkeys to transport water in the drought-stricken district of Higlo Kebele, Et

A woman drives donkeys to transport water in the drought-stricken district of Higlo Kebele, Ethiopia, Feb. 8, 2022. Catholic church leaders in Ethiopia welcomed a U.S.-funded food security program launched March 16, 2023, that will benefit millions of people suffering drought in the Horn of Africa country. (OSV News/Reuters/World Food Program/Michael Tewelde)

Fredrick Nzwili

View Author Profile


OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

NAIROBI, Kenya — March 29, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Catholic church leaders in Ethiopia are welcoming a U.S.-funded food security program that will benefit millions of people suffering from the drought in the Horn of Africa country.

Ethiopia — like Kenya and Somalia — is experiencing a severe drought described as the worst in living memory, following five consecutive failed rainy seasons.

The places most affected are the eastern and southern parts of the country, which are primarily the homelands of farmers and herders.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, launched a five-year program for drought-stricken Ethiopia March 16. Called the Joint Emergency Operation Program (JEOP), it will provide $1.3 billion in humanitarian assistance over five years in support of more than 8.5 million people.

The JEOP is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Humanitarian agencies estimate that 21 million people are food insecure in Ethiopia.

"We welcome the program. It has come at a time when the people seriously need humanitarian assistance due to the drought," Bishop Noel Seyoum Fransua of the Vicariate of Hosanna, Ethiopia, told OSV News in a telephone interview.

Advertisement

He said emergency responses, like the one being provided through Catholic Church structures, help save lives and are helping to improve people's livelihoods for the future.

Affected communities will receive food aid and other humanitarian relief services within the program. CRS, along with its local partners, has been implementing programs across the country. Among other services, they provide safe and dignified shelter to vulnerable communities; water and sanitation support; psychosocial services; and social cohesion activities supporting crop production.

"This program will provide immediate relief at a time of great need," said Bill O'Keefe, CRS' executive vice president of mission, mobilization and advocacy. "With the unrelenting drought, we are facing a once-in-a-generation emergency. Massive amounts of livestock have died, and crops can't be grown."

Related: Kenyan herder testifies to death, drought as UN climate conference meets in Egypt

According to the U.N, about 6.85 million livestock have died in Ethiopia since late 2021.

Earlier in March, Fransua, along with Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel of Addis Ababa and other leaders, visited the regions where the communities are hardest hit by drought.

Unpredictable and occasional rains that have resulted in crop failure and diminished animal pastures for herders were main factors that led to the drought. Locusts also struck the region, destroying farms and grazing lands.

The Juba River on the border between Somalia and Ethiopia is pictured April 12, 2022. The riv

The Juba River on the border between Somalia and Ethiopia is pictured April 12, 2022. The river is normally an important source of water and bustling with people and livestock. But an ongoing drought, due to five consecutive failed rainy seasons, has caused it to dry up, leaving communities without a vital water lifeline. (OSV News/Trócaire/Miriam Donohoe)

Fransua said in spite of what he called "climate change-related" natural occurrences, man-made disasters, such as armed conflicts, are making a bad situation worse.

"Even in areas where the people are supposed to produce food, they have not been able to do so. A good number of Ethiopians are also displaced. They are expecting humanitarian assistance," said the bishop.

"I am greatly moved at seeing so many people in this desperation. We have tried some food-grains such as millet and some oil to save lives, but it's not enough, " he added.

Related: CRS, others call for increased aid to prevent Somalia's looming famine

The church is staying close to the people, he explained, trying to address the challenges while working with its local and international partners.

"The government is doing a lot in collaboration with the church, but the need is huge. It cannot do it alone," he said.

Meanwhile, Christian Aid, the U.K.-based relief and development agency, has called for funding to the front line in Somalia, amid reports that an estimated 43,000 deaths might have occurred in the country in 2022 as the result of a deepening drought when compared to the 2017 and 2018 drought crises. Half of these deaths might have occurred among children under age 5.

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)

The report by the World Health Organization, UNICEF and Somalia's federal Ministry of Health & Human Services is the first official death toll announced in the drought.

"Millions are taking desperate measures to survive in the face of failed harvests, livestock deaths, water shortages and extreme hunger. As we have for Ukraine, we have a moral duty to act," Jennifer Larbie, Christian Aid's interim head of global advocacy and policy, said in a statement March 20.

The forecast spanning from January to June 2023, estimates that 135 people might also die each day due to the crisis in Somalia, with total deaths projected to fall between 18,100 and 34,200 during this period, according to UNICEF. These estimates suggest that, although famine has been averted for now, the crisis is far from over.