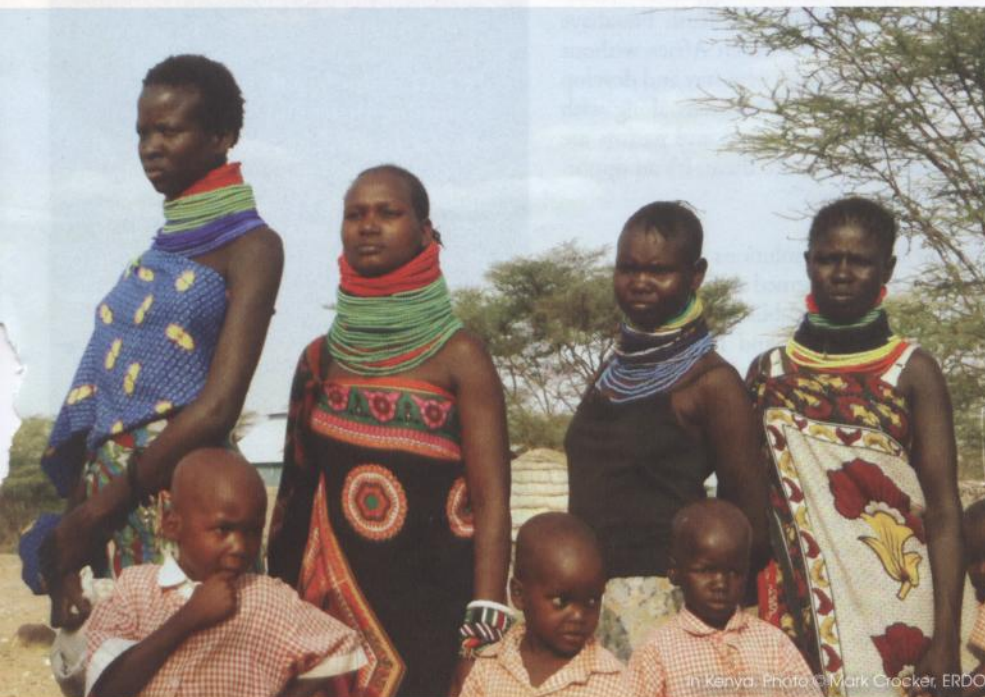


CRISIS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

by Lisa Hall-Wilson



In Ethiopia. Photo © Barb Summers, Canadian Foodgrains Bank.



In Kenya. Photo © Mark Crocker, ERDO.

A perfect storm or the hand of man?

“We are caught between a war and drought. If we stay, we may become victims of the fighting groups,” reports a women’s advocate in Somalia, “and if we run, we are likely to end up in a place with no shelter, water or food—not much of a choice.”

Floods, earthquakes and tsunamis leave an overnight footprint of devastation to photograph, but a famine is a slow progression of chronic hunger and malnutrition that goes from bad to worse to fatal over the course of months. Aid agencies warned that a famine was imminent and called for immediate funding early in 2011, but few responded. In July, the UN declared a famine in two areas of Somalia. On September 5, that widened to six of eight regions in south Somalia. They are expected to declare famine in the remaining areas before year’s end.

Twelve million people are facing food shortages. Four million of those in crisis are in Somalia, and UNICEF reports that every six minutes a child dies of malnutrition. Unni Karunakara, of Doctors Without Borders, has said, “The grim reality of Somalia today is that we are not able to get to south and central Somalia, which we consider to be the epicentre of the crisis.”

And though rains are expected in October and officials are hopeful they will be enough to sustain new crops and livestock, crops take time to grow, and the rains will further spread diseases like polio, cholera and measles.

Media people around the world have called this famine a perfect storm. But is it? The countries at the centre of the crisis—Somalia,

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Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya—have suffered two consecutive poor rainy seasons. But this region chronically struggles with water shortages and poor crops.

Changing weather patterns have been blamed for decreased rainfall. Desertification in Ethiopia further incites conflicts for control of grazing lands and water in Ethiopia and Somalia. Farmers lack fertilizer, irrigation, and mechanized farming equipment and are heavily dependent on good rains to produce subsistence crops. At the same time, local governments have been leasing out the best agricultural land to foreign countries to produce food that is exported. Market food prices are artificially inflated to the benefit of a few. Herders depend on selling livestock to buy the food they need, but the livestock are dead.

Somalia has been without a stable government for 20 years, with clashes between warlords, the UN-backed interim government and the al-Qaida linked terrorist group Al-Shabaab. This group, which controls much of south Somalia—and, until very recently, huge sections of Mogadishu—has garnered significant media attention for blocking humanitarian deliveries and has been accused of looting aid meant for famine victims and selling it for profit.

There has been much attention paid to the drought conditions, which are valid and devastating, but these ongoing challenges have made the drought a tipping point. People in the rural areas, deficient of infrastructure for health care and sanitation, were already living hand to mouth. They had no reserves when the drought struck hard.

Ruth Fessahaye immigrated to Canada from Eritrea at age eight and has close ties to East African communities here. “They’re in a panic. They’re trying to get money to family, food out there, but there’s no place to send it to. The majority of the people live in small towns. It’s difficult to get the aid to them; they have to go to the aid—and a lot of people are dying on the way.”

The stark and ugly reality of the situation is that it’s likely the strongest who make it to the relief camps. Those already weak and sick are unable to make the long trek for help. Unless the underlying issues are addressed, food shortages in the region will continue. Robert Kline is now living in Canada but is from Ethiopia. He works with rural Ethiopians to provide access to clean water. “Africans need to be able to help themselves break these cycles and the overall crush of poverty. For too many years we have tried to do it for them, in part by sending huge sums of money to their governments, expecting them to use it properly. That doesn’t mean we back off and do nothing, but it does mean that we empower, enable, educate, and equip people, where we each have defined responsibilities and accountability.”

As is the case with Haiti, anyone wishing to donate money should do their research and ensure they are choosing a reputable agency with long-standing ties in the community, one which reports back on the work they’re doing.

Officials in Somalia are asking NGOs to work with rural farmers and herders to improve husbandry and farming practices, rather than just providing aid. Ruth Fessahaye says, “You can’t really reach Africa without God. The missionaries who stay and develop churches, schools and hospitals along with the indigenous populations and pastors are favoured by the culture there. It’s an opportunity to show love.”

Pray for long-term solutions to these ongoing crises. Keep informed about the situation. Many aid agencies publish blogs and have a presence on Facebook and Twitter. The people in East Africa need help today, but they also need sustainable long-term solutions for tomorrow.

Pray for the believers and churches in these countries, that good would come from this devastating event. Pray for the safety of women and children, especially in the refugee camps, and pray that God would provide rain and good crops next season.

Robert Kline urges believers to “Become concerned, spread the word, get involved, pray. People are [dying], and [people] will continue to die if we don’t get involved.”

The change that is required will take time. The problem didn’t arise overnight and neither will the solution. Pray that instigators for positive change will rise up with God’s leading.

Lisa Hall-Wilson is a freelance writer who lives with her husband and three children in London, ON.

ERDO'S RESPONSE

ERDO, the Emergency Relief and Development Overseas arm of the PAOC, is responding with life-saving food relief in Kenya and Ethiopia. They are also involved in a small church-based program in southern Somalia that is providing two months’ rations to the most vulnerable people—enough food to keep them alive until they reach the refugee camps.

ERDO is also heavily invested in programming that builds community resilience to drought and crisis through water projects, agricultural training, animal husbandry and education—helping communities throughout drought-stricken areas of Africa help themselves.

ERDO (Emergency Relief & Development Overseas) is the humanitarian agency of The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada. ERDO is involved in four key areas: Crisis Response, Food Relief, ChildCARE Plus (Child Sponsorship), and Community Development. Kelvin Honsinger is the director of International Programs. Visit www.erdo.ca.