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Update: the pasture region drying up; APDA news and activities

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The situation in summary:

This year's main rains stopped abruptly in mid-September followed by a few violent storms in early October while temperatures remained in the high 40's. Now as the region goes into its brief 'winter', the good of the rains are fast disappearing: what grasses generated is now all dry and shrub-grazing is drying. With the least reliable winter rains of '*Daddah*' coming in December (in recent years, this season has passed without any moisture) and the short rains expected in March, the herd is peering into the void of poor pasture leading to hunger, animal stress – related sicknesses and the looming possibility of head death. With such vulnerability in the community, this is critical. See below.

a) Dry districts

There are now major dry pockets throughout the region at high risk:

- Dullassa, Arguba, parts of Awash/ Fantale and Ami Bara had one storm to minimal rain
- Southern Mille, eastern 'Adda'ar, north and central Gawwaani had minimal rain and are now dry
- Aysaita and Afambo had much less than normal rain. The usually lush Kutubla is now half dry
- The grazing lands of Geega, Dagaba and Saha in western Dubte have far less rain than expected to sustain pasture
- Northern Eli Daar had 2 storms in all and grazing is extremely minimal. Biru is highly barren.
- Erebti, eastern Barahale, northern Afdeera had extremely minimal rain.
- Awra, Yallo, Magaale, Aba'ala all had well below the expected rainfall leading to crop failure in the west

b) Milk supply in the house

In what should be the Afar peak milk season, there are few communities able to fully feed their families on milk. Again, it is expected that milk – levels with quickly drop off as animals loose condition and the herd disperses. Firstly, the cattle are in a high risk position and are already grazing near the western peripheries of the region. The goat herd is also very vulnerable, loosing milk and unable to reproduce or miscarrying. There are several places reporting animal diseases ranging from infectious animal pneumonia (CCPP and CBPP) as well as pasteurolosis, generally acknowledged as a 'stress disease.'

c) AWD high alert remains

While acute watery diarrhea (AWD) seems to have dissipated as an outbreak in Zone 1 (last outbreak was in Sifra up until October), as of November 9th, there are cases in Zone 3 among the farm-laborers picking cotton in Ami Bara - 16 cases and Gawwaani – 6 cases, according to Bureau of Health reports. Despite the Bureau's effort to bring the investors into line with safe living and sanitation regulations for the farm-laborers, the situation among these people coming in from other regions is highly unsanitary. Having been a significant part of stopping outbreaks in 11 woredas since July (a total of 205,980 people were taught 6 messages and 4,512 people with AWD treated up until early November), APDA continues the effort to raise blanket awareness on a house to house basis, distributing soap and water purifying agents.

d) Current status of vulnerability and needed response

Vulnerability in the community is mounting: already there are upwards of 1,000 households unassisted through re-stocking. Household economic survey in January/ February 2009 identified these families in northern Eli Daar, Biru, Kori, parts of Geega and Dagaba in Dubte Woreda and Finto and Uri Koma in Awra. The organization then managed to re-stock 429 households, an activity that proved actually lifesaving and life – resuming. Again, there are more than an estimated 3,000 households in these districts having less than 10 goats thus in danger of becoming destitute should these animals die.

Numbers among the most vulnerable being treated for severe acute malnutrition had fallen to 420 but this is expected to increase under the above – described conditions. Again, these people have recently shown their tendency to AWD transmission. There are specific needs such as water trucking in the Su'ula to Buure district of Eli Daar where water source is not available and water held in cisterns has now dried up. This includes the refugee/ displaced population around Su'ula.

In summary, APDA is urgently requiring to

- a) Provide supplementary animal feed for milking goats in around 2 to 3,000 households
- b) Undertake ongoing nutritional and disease surveillance in the most vulnerable communities
- c) Continue the severe acute malnutrition treatment as needed and provide supplementary food
- d) Work to provide town sanitation to stop urban to rural transmission
- e) Facilitating the community to construct more water reservoirs is also both adamant and well-directed in that through cash for work/ food for work vulnerable households can be re-enforced.

In the medium term, destitute households must be re-stocked. They cannot become farmers/ town-folk or the like. They now live from relief assistance as well as from the egalitarian culture of the Afar.

Refugee news

Starvation in Eritrea continues to push its citizens into Ethiopia. The last 2 months have seen a steady increase in those coming, both as families and as individuals. In towns, people are restricted in what they can purchase: in a day: one piece of bread per person. In the rural districts there is no grain. Aside from the lack of food in Eritrea, they report that those fishing on the Red Sea are now prevented from doing so. Again medications are not available. As far as possible, the refugees are trying to come down as far as Assayita in order to register with UNHCR and ARRA, the government responsible agent but for many, the distance is too great and there is no means of assistance.

Development News

1. APDA re-registered!

Under the new Ethiopian CSO law, APDA is re-registered as a Resident NGO, registration number 0228 as from 11th November 2009. The certificate of this registration is available to those partners and supporters who may require it.

2. A once - in - an - organization occasion: 630 APDA members + 300 - odd community members gather!!

Another historic event for us!! Almost 95% of our membership walked to transport facilities from their various remote rural places and arrived in Logya on the back of trucks and buses to spend 14th and 15th together demonstrating our practical desire to be responsible leaders in the fight to gain community HIV response. The Regional Vice – President opened the conference and government bureaus that work with APDA were part of the meeting.

Over 500 members happily had themselves tested for HIV and through the organization HIV workplace policy those found to be positive will be supported. The 2 days proved to be a time of outstanding celebration: the full range of Afar cultural dancing, drama, traditional poetry (kasow) was displayed and the tremendous bond of sharing one objective for the development of the Afar pastoralists was demonstrably tangible!!! The organization packed out the Afar Region Museum auditorium listening to a number of notable speakers including that of Jamal Abdulkadir Reddo, the head of the Afar Language Development and Enrichment Center. In all, the meeting resolved to struggle for a more effective community response to HIV & AIDS, to stop kaat as far as possible realizing the connection between HIV spread/ deepening poverty and kaat chewing and to make every effort to support the use and development of Afar language.

3. The urgency of HIV work in the rural districts

In the above meeting, the government reported that of 6,000 people tested in the pastoralist society recently, 444 proved positive to HIV (7.4% prevalence). This is alarming and all the more reason why APDA needs to work harder and have a very strong program to assist those affected since ARVs are only available in 7 health institutions in the region.

4. Progress in community economic development

APDA is currently facilitating the community to send goats and sheep to Djibouti for export benefiting from the coming Islamic Eid of Arafa through the now 12 community animal marketing cooperatives. A fattening site is being established on the outskirts of Logya for this purpose. This APDA sees this as the beginning and a learning exercise with the vision to establish a flourishing cross – border market for the community through Djibouti to Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The northern Somali port of Berbera is now very active sending Somali livestock therefore there is now adequate space in the Djibouti market. Afar animals are preferred by the Arabs and described as *'baaldiya'* selling for a higher price.

5. Opening new work in Dawwe and Gawwaani among communities untrenched in illiterate practices such as FGM/ C

In two adjoining communities, one in Dawwe, Zone 5 and the other in Gawwaani, APDA is beginning a 3 – year project to enable the entire community to be empowered through Afar literacy and numeracy. Once literate, particularly women will go on to learn how to implement income generating

activities together. Through training community religious and traditional leaders and enabling women, they will plan to leave harmful practices including FGM/ C (female genital mutilation) and forced marriage. The initial baseline survey describes these communities as being totally closed to female involvement in any aspect of community life beyond the house. APDA will train literacy teachers and women extension workers from the community to lead this challenging activity.

6. Progress toward an improved plan for safe motherhood

Afar are on the verge of moving forward with decisive practical steps to gaining the strategy of securing safe motherhood. Each month, Afar women are dying in child-birth and even more neonates are dying in the first week of delivery. The '*Barbara May Maternal Emergency Center*' in Mille is on its way to completion. APDA's first student midwife has begun 3 years training in Addis Ababa. The plan is also to establish 8 district waiting areas attached to major clinics that are satellite to the Mille Center with a midwife serving 'mothers at risk' linking to APDA's team of health workers, women extension workers and trained traditional birth attendants in the rural areas. Much of this is materializing through the extra-ordinary vision of medicos and other folk in Australia who have established their own foundation now on its way to registration: the '*Barbara May Foundation*'.

7. Kutubla, one of the little known treasures of the region

In November, the program officers visited our 12 health workers, 8 community teachers and 6 women extension workers in Kutubla, a highly exotic environment of nature hidden between the last bends of the Awash River. Abundant in crocodiles, hippos, amazing birdlife, wild cattle, mosquitoes and more - the team waded through croc/ hippo infested water to reach the community – these Afar have very special traditions and beliefs born of their isolation.

Aside from the wonder, one is also struck by the fact that the Kutubla Afar are thoroughly ignored in their daily vigilance to live: a woman was mauled by a crocodile during th visit; the community face the daily menace of *Issa*, an Somali clan raiding them day and night and the new threat fo their land drying up. A vast once flood plain has dried as of 2008 due to re-direction of Awash after the dammg of the Awash just south of Logya. Kutubla had started maize farming in this plain – that option and grazing in almost 50% of the land is now gone. Their cattle are currently grazing in the far west of the region in Sifra and Uwwa. This once wealthy Afar now speak of diminished herds and lack of milk. Nevertheless, it was inspiring to see them plough land where they can to farm as well as herd animals – they sell their grain to the Afar of Lake 'As'aal in Djibouti in exchange for salt. Finally, the centuries – old date palm plantation in Harsa, eastern Kutubla bordering Djibouti is highly under threat since the plantation depends on the annual flooding of the Awash River.