

AFAR PASTORALIST DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION QAFAR DACARSITTOH DADALIH EGLA

P.O. Box 592, Addis Ababa

afarpda@yahoo.com, afarpastoral@ethionet.et, www.apdaethiopia.org

Telephone: (251) 011 5159787, (251) 033 5500002

Fax: (251) 011 5538820, (251) 033 5500352

Update of drought crisis and development activities

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The situation in summary:

Having critically not seen any rain since late September, the pastoralists were again worn onto the verge of another animal – loss crisis. This however is relieved in many districts by rain in February – totally out of season and in the first place, like the gentle rains of London and climaxing in an all – night storm in some districts on February 27th/ 28th.

All major grazing districts were totally dry and the animal herd had already moved out into the Amhara and Tigray border hills including into Cheffa Valley in Amhara Region causing conflict clashes with the neighboring populations in mid- February. The most critical districts without rain include northern and central Eli Daar, parts of Kori and a totally desolate belt encompassing 'Aba'ala, Erebti and Magaale in Zone 2. These 3 districts as well as Eli Daar and Kori have thirst, and severe acute malnutrition.

1. Rain in February

These unusual storms of February have brought mainly gentle rain that has been very localized leaving the landscaped striped with rain – deficit areas. From the districts reported of concern in early January, much of Zone 3 is now relieved and with green shrub pasture aside from some parts of Ami Bara. River flooding cut Dullassa off from region access for over 7 days. In Add'a'ar and Mille rain has fallen over much of the completely parched grazing pasture of Yaldi and Waranso. Sifra is already green. Teeru has received river water twice but no actual rain in the basin. Communities had reached the point where traditional wells aside from one group of wells called 'Der 'Eela' were dry. Dirma, much of Yallo and parts of Goolina are now greening again. Awra remains dry with the herds deep into Amhara hills and Teeru. The 27th/ 28th storm reached Musle in Kori, a grazing plain that has been without grass for 4 years, Kori, Guyah and filled the Bargaale dam. It put the Geega River into full flow and some rain has fallen in the drastically parched areas of Dagaba where drought caused over half of the community to leave the district for the first time in recent years. As we report, rain is falling and the talk of the elders in the community is that 'suggum', the short rains have made an early start having blended in with the winter rains. The season of Suggum in past years has been extremely short and mainly composing of a couple of storms in April.

2. Malnutrition and human health

Much of the Erebti goat herding community is no longer nomadic since they have almost no goats. 20,000 of the 43,000 people are dependant on relief assistance, according to the Woreda Head. There has not been a favorable year for the past 12 with the situation deteriorating so that in the past 3 years almost no rain has fallen. The woreda health authorities report severe acute malnutrition in most of the 13 kebeles. The neighboring woredas of Magaale and Ab'a'ala in the west have a marginally better position being closely linked to Tigray but equally, the land is dry and the herds have died in overwhelming numbers. The Aba'ala farms are dry.

APDA health workers are undertaking rapid nutrition assessment in all drought – affected communities finding a steep increase in those malnourished in February compared to December/ early January.

General acute malnutrition rates in northern Eli Daar, Teeru, Geega in northern Dubte and refugees in the Aysaita camp were 54.2%, 38%, 17.05% and 50% respectively. Severe acute malnutrition among the same communities tallied as 17.78%, 14.77%, 8.76% and 13.51% respectively. APDA has not assessed in Erebti and clearly situation is critical in northern Eli Daar and the refugee camp where food shortage has been reported. The organization has identified almost 700 people in 3 districts with severe acute malnutrition in February and with ongoing rapid assessments in other districts, more can be expected from households close to destitution through herd loss.

The main disease outbreak in the community causing havoc is currently whooping cough in many woredas. This is also associated with influenza leading to pneumonia. Acute watery diarrhea (AWD) has not re-occurred since stopping in December.

3. Herd status and the market

Overall, the Afar are in grave fear of further loss of their herds since they now have the smallest herd in decades. The cattle herd is now almost 30% of what it was 7 years ago and the goat herd around 50% lost. There are multiple reports of disease outbreaks and the type of diseases is equally numerous including the range of infectious diseases, internal and external parasites.

Goats in top condition sell for up to 200.00 but recent report from Teeru indicated that the animal condition is far from readily marketable as most of the pastoralists walking their animals to the Yallo market were unable to secure a buyer in mid-February. Again, the goat – market is exacerbated by the current 50 days of Christian orthodox fasting in the country. Comparatively, 50 kilograms of unground grain is up to 300.00 ETB in the distant woredas such as Teeru, Awra, northern Eli Daar.

4. Refugees in Afar Region

Along with the local people in these now drought – desolate districts, the Eritrean refugees in northern Eli Da'ar, Erebti and Aysaita are highly malnourished as seen above. APDA is working to treat those identified. New registration has been carried out by UNHCR and there are ongoing reports of newcomers from Eritrea in northern Eli Daar as well as in Erebti.

5. APDA's current assistance and perception into recovery

APDA is currently engaged in 3 projects aiming at relief as well as directing to recovery:

- a) An 8 – month AWD project that has now seen the community through the halting of the June to December 2009 outbreak and is now concentrating on rehabilitating water sources, training and securing community water and sanitation committees and supporting the government effort in prioritizing sanitation surveillance.
- b) 18 – month project that builds on past experiences of rain-water harvesting constructions and is also venturing into pasture rejuvenation. The plan is to construct 10 double cylinder cisterns, 10 shallow wells and 10 dams in drought – affected communities as well as rehabilitating a total of 1,500 hectares of grazing pasture through re-seeding along with fencing off pasture for drought reserve grazing. The project also includes rehabilitation of a salt/ mineral lick block plant for animals.
- c) Six – month project aiming to provide supplementary feed for milking goats in households with less than 15 remaining goats for 3 months along with veterinary service in pasture – parched districts such as Eli Daar where malnutrition is the highest. This will provide milk in the household. APDA health workers will support this project with ongoing nutrition and disease surveillance among the most vulnerable communities and in Logya, the hub of pastoralist marketing and gathering, town sanitation will be improved.

Achieving the above will greatly contribute to lowering vulnerability in near destitute households, securing water and the well-being of the herd as well as working toward preventing the killer, AWD. However, the major gaps in the plan remain that

- a) Already known and identified destitute pastoralists require restoration of assets – restocking or income generation of some sort
- b) More water sources need to be constructed and much needs to be done urgently to protect drought – damaged grazing lands as well as to stop forest destruction for charcoal and fuel.

6. Supporting the government in the effort to improve EPI vaccination coverage

The Regional Government has launched a region – wide campaign of advocacy to improve vaccination coverage in the community through the participation of all civil and government stakeholders. Using APDA’s experience of campaign EPI vaccination in 3 rounds, 6 woredas are currently being trialed for ‘enhanced outreach vaccination’. APDA health workers are assisting in some of the remote parts of these 6 woredas. From its side, APDA has begun an ambitious year of EPI vaccination implementation aiming to cover a further 6 districts: Yallo and Uwwa (Zone 4) where the campaign opened in February, in Erebti and Magaale (zone 2) where logistics to reach the community are now established and in Geega and Dagaba in the north of Dubte once the communities return from their scattered migration with the recent rains and finally Kori will be targeted. APDA’s system in gaining coverage remains unique in that a generator – powered refrigerator is put as close to the target community as possible assuring a cold – chain.

7. Reducing the grip and stopping harmful practices

In almost all the most remote communities, the leadership is aware that female genital mutilation is unacceptable both in religion and law and the practice of the extreme form is now seen as unacceptable in the community. The discussion to stop the practice all together is now taking form. In ‘Adda’ar Woreda in February, the Head of the Regional Islamic Council led a community meeting of religious leaders and clan elders as they were in dispte on the matter. With his guidance, they reached the position to stop any form of female genital cutting. At the same meeting, over 50 women requiring resolution of marriage issues gained assistance, some had been deserted for up to 4 years.

8. Vocational training center to be constructed and implemented

APDA has just secured acceptance to construct a vocational training center in Logya with 4 training/ work - rooms aiming to train out – of – work people in such trades as leather – making, carpentry, electricity and hospitality. This APDA sees as a great opportunity in view of the current down-turn in household food security as well as the ever – increasing unnumber of refugees entering the region needing support from the community.

9. Raising the capacity of program teachers

This month some 38 teachers passed examinations of distance education taking them up to grades 6, 7, 8 and 9. The program iscontinuing to seek out opportunities of building the capacity of all of its workers aiming that community development will be led by the local people.

10. Meeting on cross- border response to HIV and AIDS

APDA joined the government in a meeting with a delegation from Djibouti on securing a plan to work on the HIV & AIDS issue in unison. IGAD has agreed to fund a clinic capable of assisting affected people in Hayyu, Ethiopia and all parties are exchanging information and experiences in order to fully facilitate a service that will remove all barriers to ongoing service across the Djibouti/ Ethiopia border.

11. Working to improve the household economy

Through awareness raising and trainiing facilitation, there are now some encouraging local associations such as 2 in Aysaita, one all female and the other mixed that are horticulture – farming as well as fodder – farming selling their produce in Aysaita town. In Mille and enterprising group of mainly ex-pastoralists have started bee – keeping. In Uwwa another group are buying goats in Sifra and selling them on the Yallo market. The long dry season has been a deterrent for most of them since their membership has become dspersed but with the current rain, there is hope again.