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Drought Fuels New Food Crisis In East Africa

The worst drought in more than a decade is fuelling a new hunger crisis in East Africa

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Aid agencies say 28 million people in the region are facing severe food shortages because of the lack of rain.

One of the worst-affected areas is the north east of Kenya where three years without rain has left the scorched landscape littered with the carcasses of dead livestock.

Seventy per cent of the herds of cattle and goats have died in the past year, threatening the survival of entire communities who depend on them for their food and income.

In the small hospital in the dusty town of Wajir the beds are full of severely malnourished infants, watched over by their fearful, exhausted mothers.

The women cannot find food so they are not producing the milk to feed their babies, said Dr Dennis Onanda, examining a painfully thin two-month-old boy.

"Some 30% of our patients used to be malnourished, but since June the figure has risen to 70%," he said.

Save the Children is running outreach clinics across the region to try to monitor the state of the under-fives and provide emergency food supplies to those who need them.

But, like all of the aid agencies operating in East Africa, the charity says it needs extra funds to reach all of those in need.

The drought has led to soaring food prices. In the barter economy a sack of maize that was once traded for one goat now costs four.

The Kenyan government has resorted to trucking water into the remote villages where supplies are still so limited that each family is permitted just 20 litres per day.

Ebla Ibrahim has six children to support on her ration, as well as a small herd of snow white goats.

"It doesn't even last us the morning," she told me, gesturing towards her children and the livestock.

"We drink a little and then we're all thirsty again," she said standing next to a tiny dome built from twigs where she lives.

We watched as her six-month-old son gulped down a few mouthfuls from his mother's hand. It was his first drink in hours.

The drought is predicted to end within weeks, to be replaced by potentially devastating El Nino rains and flooding.

It is an increasingly deadly cycle in the region, caused not only by climate change but deforestation and unregulated irrigation projects.