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Worsening Crisis in Sudan

A serious crisis is rapidly taking shape in several areas of Sudan. Following below average and sporadic rainfall during the long rains in July-August last year, the resultant poor harvest and water shortage have negatively affected both human populations and livestock in much of western Sudan (See GHA Food Security Updates for January, March, and April 2001). With the onset of the "normal" hungry season in already severely drought-affected areas, and further population displacement as a result of an increased level of fighting in Sudan's civil war, the prospects for the coming months are not good. However, recent policy changes towards Sudan on the part of external actors may herald an improved short-term humanitarian response. This edition of Greater Horn of Africa Food Security Update deals specifically with the current situation in the Sudan — focusing primarily on the drought-affected areas of western Sudan.

Background to the Crisis and Summary of the Current Humanitarian Situation

Figure 1 Administrative areas of Sudan



The current crisis has to be viewed against the backdrop of Sudan's civil war — among the longest-running wars in Africa — and against the chronic vulnerability to drought of many areas of the country. During the agricultural season of 2000 (July to September), much of the populated area of Kordofan and Darfur States in western Sudan, as well as part of the Red Sea Hills and Butana Regions in Eastern Sudan and parts of North Bahr al Ghazal and Unity States in the South, received below-average, and very erratic rainfall. The poor rains resulted, at best, in poor harvests at the end of 2000, and in many cases, in complete crop failure and severe local shortages of water for human and livestock consumption.

The effects of this drought could be observed as early as December 2000, and by February 2001, many of the operational agencies in the area (Government of Sudan, UN, and NGO) were doing their best to highlight the situation to donors and to respond to the humanitarian situation with the limited resources available. Evidence of the current situation is incomplete, but region-by-region, the picture that emerges is one of a serious crisis:

- Drinking water (for both humans and livestock) is in critically short supply in much of western Sudan, as the rainfall was inadequate to replenish the surface water catchment systems that serve as the main supply of water in most of the area.
- There is increasing use of extreme coping mechanisms, including severe rationing of food, and consumption of seed stock.
- The shortage of water has limited the scope for livestock-based coping strategies, and by March 2001, out-migration from some Local Councils (Local Councils are the fourth administrative unit in Sudan) had begun.

- Prices of grain are three times higher than the same period during 1999, and nearly twice that of 2000 — and still increasing.
- A Save the Children (SC/UK) nutritional survey in North Darfur in May found a prevalence of 23.4% Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM). A CARE survey in North and West Kordofan found a prevalence of 22.4% GAM.

The drought is compounded by other factors — most notably increased displacement of civilian populations because of the civil war. Increased fighting has been reported around the oilfields in Unity State; an offensive in West Bahr al Ghazal has resulted in new displacement into South Darfur, where the effects of the drought are already seriously felt; and increased fighting in South Kordofan in and around the Nuba Mountains is also resulting in both disruption of agricultural production and displacement of civilian populations. The war in Unity State may be entering a new phase, with the merger of the Sudan People's Democratic Front (SPDF) with the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM). Attacks on various humanitarian facilities in the South, and a bombing attack on a WFP food aid airdrop zone on June 6, highlight the difficulties of responding to the humanitarian crisis under the current circumstances.

As of early June 2001, over 3 million people nationwide were listed by UN agencies as affected by either the drought or the civil war or both. Aggregate requirements for food aid (calculated in this case as the gap between estimated requirements and total production plus commercial imports) were listed by FAO in May as 212,000 MT nation-wide. The FAO/GIEWS crop assessment in April noted some prospect for improved harvests this year compared to last year, but still below the five-year average. However, little of this harvest will be available until later in the year — it is the next several months that will prove to be critical. The period between May and October is usually the time of the greatest seasonal vulnerability to food insecurity. Government of Sudan figures show a total of 282,000 MT of food (both emergency food aid and some sales for market stability) required from June to October (this figure covers areas under government control) with the largest numbers of affected people are in Kordofan and Darfur (Table 1).

Table 1. Current Humanitarian Situation in Government controlled areas of Sudan

Location	People Affected	Major Cause	Food Aid Needs (Jun – Oct 01)	Other Critical Factors
West Kordofan	68,000	Drought	15,000 MT	Water, health
North Kordofan	691,000	Drought	30,000 MT	Water, health
South Kordofan	100,000	Drought/ War displacement	22,000 MT	Water, shelter
West Darfur	250,000	Drought	32,000 MT	Water, health
North Darfur	504,000	Drought	30,000 MT	Water, health
South Darfur	40,000	Drought/ War displacement	42,000 MT	Water, shelter
Red Sea Hills	109,000	Drought	14,000 MT	Water
Kassala	43,000	War displacement	30,000 MT	Shelter
Blue Nile/White Nile	15,000	War displacement	34,000 MT	Shelter
GoS areas in South*		Drought and War	33,000 MT	
TOTAL	1,820,000		282,000 MT	

Information Source: The Humanitarian Aid Commission (Government of Sudan)
** For detailed information on southern Sudan, see the regular monthly FEWSNet Food Security Update.*

The Response to Date

In January 2001 the Government of Sudan lifted an import ban on grains, and subsequently exempted import duties on basic foodstuffs. This strategy has improved the commercial import picture, but has not been sufficient to evoke a sufficient market response to avert the crisis at the household level in western Sudan as food prices in drought-affected areas continued to rise. The Government has since provided food through both the Strategic Food Reserve, and through Islamic *Zakat* (*tithing*) mechanisms. Further imports are expected — some of which will be channeled into free distribution. A Consolidated UN Appeal was launched in early 2001 for \$135 Million, but attracted few pledges until late May. Total food aid pledges during this period were only about 55,000 MT. Pledges to the CAP appeal through mid-May amounted to 30% of the request, according to OCHA.

However, the food pipeline was recently helped by a significant change in US Government policy towards humanitarian response in Sudan, announced in conjunction with the visit to the region of Secretary of State Colin Powell and USAID Administrator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan, Andrew Natsios, in May. Whereas in the past, the US aid in the north was targeted to those displaced by the war, Natsios stated at a press conference (Nairobi, May 27th) that US food aid would now be used for the emergency needs of drought-affected populations on both sides of the conflict. USAID simultaneously pledged 40,000 MT of food (23,000MT for the south and 17,000MT for the north). The shipment to Port Sudan is expected around the 20th June, following a diversion from Mozambique.

Out of a total GoS assessed requirement for short-term food assistance of roughly 280,000 MT, 105,000 MT have now been pledged — somewhat less than 40% of overall needs. WFP aims to contribute approximately 68,000MT of food (including emergency, food for work and school feeding) in the northern sector and they have pledged for 80% of this amount. For the non-food responses included in the appeal (primarily for emergency health interventions, supplementary/therapeutic feeding, and water), US\$ 58 Million has been pledged against a requirement of US\$ 98 Million. As is often the case in emergencies, it remains difficult to define both the precise needs and the current shortfall.

Issues Arising in the Response

Despite the recent improvement in the pledging situation, several critical issues have arisen. The first is that the pledges have come relatively late, raising several problems:

- Some food for work activities — originally scheduled for the time period when household labor demands for agricultural production were low — were postponed because of low pledges and/or slow deliveries. This month and next are critical times for land preparation for planting, which makes Food for Work on public works an inappropriate activity. As food needs are still high, food aid will have to be channeled into free distribution, causing further delays while seeking approval to change the means of distribution. Many planned public works projects aimed at improving water catchment systems will be dropped and the underlying water problems will remain unsolved.
- Food needs reach their peak during the rains — but access by road is difficult or impossible in the rainy season in many of the drought stricken areas. However, it is unlikely that sufficient food will arrive in time to permit adequate pre-positioning of food. This will result either in widespread out-migration — and the attendant disruption to this year's agricultural activities — or in the use of expensive airlifts.
- If the delivery of pledged food takes as long as has been the case in other recent emergencies, there is a risk that substantial shipments of food aid will arrive in the country at the time of the 2001 season harvest. This could depress prices significantly and disrupt production and long-run food security.

A second issue is the increased level of fighting in several areas already mentioned, with increased difficulty in humanitarian access as a result.

A third issue of concern is that both the consumption of seed stock and short-term migration is likely to mean lower agricultural production this year in the most severely affected areas — meaning that the recovery time will stretch into next year, even if the rains are reasonably good this year.

Conclusion: Priority Policy Steps And Actions

In summary, the current situation calls for several immediate actions by the international community:

- **Increase pledging:** The Appeal is still under-resourced, in both food and cash categories.
- **Improve the speed of response:** To avert the short-term humanitarian crisis, pre-position food before the rains and lessen the likelihood of disruption of markets later in the year, pledged food aid must reach Sudan quickly. Further diversion of food to Sudan from other, less pressing destinations is urgently required. The airlifting of food stocks available in Country, to the most affected areas, is justified in view of the difficulties of road access with the onset of the rains.

- **Bring displacement under control:** Increased commitment by the international community to bring about a ceasefire will improve humanitarian access in war-affected areas.

In the longer term, underlying vulnerability must be reduced by:

- **Dealing with underlying factors that increase vulnerability to drought:** Longer-term efforts are needed to improve resilience of local communities to drought in the drought-prone areas of western Sudan.
- **Dealing with the underlying causes of displacement:** Increased commitment by the international community to bring the major warring parties together in substantial peace talks aimed at bringing an end to the long-running civil war and to address the underlying causes of the war.

Déjà vu: Early Warning and Late Response—General Reasons for a Recurrent Problem

The current crisis in Sudan is not the first time that a serious problem has been adequately predicted by early warning systems, but where the early warning failed to generate a timely response. For example, while the overall response in last year's crisis in Ethiopia came close to meeting aggregate requirements, the response was extremely slow and for several months, humanitarian conditions on the ground continued to worsen despite the fact that the international community was well informed about the situation.

What are some of the major causes of slow response to adequately predicted humanitarian crises? A quick review highlights the following issues, which apply to the actions of both host Governments and external agencies:

- **Information may be available, but it may not be easy to interpret.** With a rapidly expanding number of early warning information sources, specific information may be available, but in the absence of trend information or baseline data, it may be very difficult to interpret. A case in point was last year's crisis in the Somali Region of Ethiopia: some information existed to imply that the situation was serious, but little baseline information was available to help analysts determine how serious.
- **Logistical and bureaucratic delays.** A "business as usual" approach, even in the face of evidence of a rapidly deteriorating situation on the ground, results in bureaucratic delays in approving funding, poor coordination, and poor logistics.
- **Mistrust between donor and recipient governments.** In an insightful book, "Famine Early Warning and Response: The Missing Link" (London: IT Publications, 1995), Buchanan-Smith and Davies argue that much of the problem of slow response is related to the fact that donors are skeptical of the needs figures published by governments of crisis-affected countries. The level of institutional mistrust between donor and recipient governments in some cases prevents any real response from being pledged until there is serious evidence of deteriorating humanitarian conditions—such as a high prevalence of malnutrition or increased mortality. Pledging at that point ensures that the response will be late, no matter how generous. Buchanan-Smith and Davies cite numerous examples in the Greater Horn Region during the 1980s and 1990s.
- **Humanitarian access may be severely constrained.** For a variety of reasons—often political—controlling authorities sometimes either outright refuse access to crisis-affected populations, or do little to enable access. A case in point was the 1998 Bahr el Ghazal emergency, during which access by Operation Lifeline Sudan was intermittently prohibited until the crisis had turned into a full-blown famine. Other times insecurity is the constraint, with warring parties unwilling to provide for humanitarian access or guarantee safety of humanitarian actors. The conflict in eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a case in point.
- **Politics.** Though humanitarian assistance (unlike development aid) is not supposed to be conditional to political concerns, there is evidence that it often is. Some analysts attribute at least part of the slow response last year in Ethiopia to the fact that donors were pressuring the Ethiopian government to come to terms with Eritrea over their border dispute. In other situations, domestic politics can influence responses to sub-national crises.