

Malnutrition ravaging Somali refugees in Ethiopia

DOLO ADO, Ethiopia, Aug 13, 2011 (AFP) - Mohamed Ibrahim fled to Ethiopia to seek relief from a harsh drought devastating his country Somalia, but misery stalked him in refuge where malnutrition recently killed his one-year-old son.

The desperate exodus by tens of thousands of Somalis to find assistance across borders has taken them to refugee settlements, where spartan living conditions, congestion and threat of disease are making survival difficult.



AFP - Somali refugees line up to be vaccinated against measles at the Ethiopian Kobe camp in Dolo Ado. Over 18,000 refugees will be inoculated this week

"I thought that if I came here I would get a better life than in Somalia," said Ibrahim, sitting outside his tent in the southern Ethiopia Kobe camp.

"I am sad because my baby died," added Ibrahim, initially turned away from a government-run hospital in the camp due to lack of drugs for his child.

Aid agencies say malnutrition and mortality rates in the Ethiopian refugee camps remain high, with more than 30 percent of children under five suffering malnutrition and about six deaths per 10,000 people, according to UN estimates.

Opportunistic diseases like pneumonia and measles have also erupted among the already weakened population.

"The malnutrition and mortality rates are above the emergency threshold. It's a big concern for us," said Allen Maina, a UN public health officer.

Aid workers voiced concern that overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of proper health care is worsening the misery of the refugees.

The Ethiopian Dolo Ado refugee complex hosts 118,400 Somali refugees, including 78,000 who arrived this year, according to the UN refugee agency.

"The conditions in the camp are very poor in terms of water and sanitation and that causes diarrhoea, which causes malnutrition. It's a vicious cycle," said Carolina Nanclares, a doctor with medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF).

"For me, it's the worst I have ever seen," Nanclares said.

A prolonged drought in the Horn of Africa region has hit war-ravaged Somalia hardest,

sending hundreds of thousands of its citizens to neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia.

Around 12 million people are in danger of starvation due to the region's worst drought in decades.

Many Somalis face the difficult choice of whether to flee with severely malnourished children or care for them at home.

Farah Mohamed Malim, 46, brought his four-year-old son to an MSF clinic in the camps. Although his child has improved, his sick ten-month-old infant had to stay at home with the mother, who is also sick and too weak to travel.

"I'm worried he's at risk of dying," Malim said, sitting in the MSF ward where stick-thin children occupy most of the centre's 120 beds.

"We want a life the way others live. We want medicine. We want food like others. We want rice and spaghetti," said Malim.

MSF medical coordinator Vanessa Cramond said aid groups should address the dilemma faced by many family heads who must decide whether to bring the sickest children to hospital or stay at home to take care of the whole family.

"There are some impossible decisions that people have to make," she said. "That's a gap that as an international community we must close."

Cramond said that adolescents are also suffering malnutrition, noting that a third of those admitted at a newly-opened camp are above five years.





"It suggests a wider scale emergency that affects the whole household," she said, explaining that it will take several months before nutrition rates increase and mortality comes down.

Dawey Ibrahim has seen malnutrition spread in her family. Her eight-year-old and 15-year-old children are severely malnourished and another, who is 18, suffers from regular fainting spells.

"We left Somalia because we didn't have anything. Now we are dying from hunger," said Ibrahim, her 15-year-old crouching by her side under the scorching sun, too weak to stand on his own.

However the UN public health official Maina said he was hopeful the situation will improve as relief organisations boost support for the drought-struck Somali refugees.

"In a few weeks we are going to see the numbers go down," he said. "This is a catch-up campaign."

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