

## Food crisis escalating in Ethiopia

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SHASHAMANE, Ethiopia — Like so many other victims of Ethiopia's hunger crisis, Usheto Beriso weighs just half of what he should. He is always cold and swaddled in a blanket. His limbs are stick-thin.

But Usheto is not the typical face of Ethiopia's chronic food problems, the scrawny baby or the ailing toddler. At age 55, he is among a growing number of adults and older children — traditionally less-vulnerable groups — who have been stricken by severe hunger because of poor rains and recent crop failure in southern Ethiopia, health workers say.

“To see adults in this condition, it's a very serious situation,” said Mieke Steenssens, a volunteer nurse with Doctors Without Borders, as she registered the 5-foot-4 Usheto's weight at just 73 pounds.

Aid groups say the older victims suggest that there is an escalation in the crisis in Ethiopia, a country that drew international attention in 1984 when a famine compounded by communist policies killed 1 million people.

An agricultural economy

This year's crisis, brought on by a countrywide drought and skyrocketing global food prices, is far less severe. But while figures for how many adults and older children are affected are not available, at least four aid groups interviewed said they noticed a troubling increase.

“We're overwhelmed,” said Margaret Aguirre, a spokeswoman for the International Medical Corps, an aid agency based in Santa Monica, Calif. “There's not enough food and everyone's starving, and that's all there is to it.”

“Older children are starting to show the signs of malnutrition when normally they might be able to withstand shocks to the system,” she added. “What's particularly concerning is that the moderately malnourished are soaring. It's increasing so much that it means those children are going to slide into severe malnutrition.”

Ethiopia is not alone in suffering through the worldwide food crisis, which is threatening to push the number of hungry people in the world toward 1 billion. Last

week, a U.N. summit of 181 countries pledged to reduce trade barriers and boost agricultural production to combat rising food prices.

But in Ethiopia, food production is hampered by drought, meaning that the country has been hit with a double blow. Drought is especially disastrous in Ethiopia because more than 80 percent of people live off the land. Agriculture drives the economy, accounting for half of all domestic production and 85 percent of exports.

Sending more food is one solution, but there already is a global crunch as rising fuel prices drive up the cost of fertilizers, farm vehicle use and transport of food to market. Biofuels, which are made from crops such as sugar cane and corn, are another contentious issue, with critics saying they compete with food crops.

#### Desperate appeals

The problem is echoed across Africa, from Kenya and Somalia and farther west. Exacerbating the global rise in food prices, which has sparked protests and riots in several West African nations, is an annual decline in food reserves across the high desertlike region called the Sahel, just below the Sahara Desert.

The so-called “lean season” that begins around June is marked by nearly empty grain stores, with the next harvest not due until around September. Locust invasions and poor rains in recent years have only worsened the condition, which leads to deadly malnutrition among young children.

Aid agencies in Ethiopia are issuing desperate appeals for donor funding, saying emergency intervention is not enough. Ethiopia receives more food aid than nearly every other country in the world, most of it from the United States, which has provided \$300 million in emergency assistance to relief agencies in the past year.

But despite the international help, the country is again facing hunger on a mass scale. Part of the reason, according to John Holmes, the top U.N. humanitarian official, is the country’s climate, chronic drought and the large population of 78 million people.

“The World Food Program feeds some 8 million people already, together with the others in Ethiopia,” he said. “But we may need to increase that, because of drought.”

The United Nations has characterized this year’s shortage — in which about 4.5 million people are in need of food aid — as the worst since 2003, when droughts led 13.2 million to seek aid. In 2000, more than 10 million needed food.

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