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**Abstract:** The article discusses drought in East Africa. The region is experiencing its worst drought since 2000, and crops have failed in Ethiopia, Sudan, and parts of Kenya. Economic and social effects of the drought, such as violent conflicts related to cattle stealing, are examined. Governments are seeking to improve water supply management.

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**East Africa's drought**

**A catastrophe is looming****Governments are at their wits' end to keep their hungry people alive**

Dateline: NAIROBI

THIS year's drought is the worst in east Africa since 2000, and possibly since 1991. Famine stalks the land. The failure of rains in parts of Ethiopia may increase the number needing food handouts by 5m, in addition to the 8m already getting them, in a population of 80m. The production of Kenyan maize, the country's staple, is likely to drop by one-third, hitting poor farmers' families hardest. The International Committee of the Red Cross says famine in Somalia is going to be worse than ever. Handouts are urgently needed by roughly 3.6m Somalis, nearly half the resident population (several million having already emigrated during years of strife). In fractious northern Uganda cereal output is likely to fall by half. Parts of South Sudan, Eritrea, the Central African Republic and Tanzania are suffering too. Rich countries are being less generous than usual. The UN's World Food Programme says it has only \$24m of the \$300m it needs just to feed hungry Kenyans for the next six months.

In Mwingi district, in Kenya's Kamba region, the crops have totally failed. Villagers are surviving on monthly government handouts of maize-meal, rice and a little cooking oil. Worse than the hunger, say local leaders, is the thirst. People are digging wells by hand, but they hit rock. They plead for the means to go deeper but they cannot afford the dynamite or machinery.

In the pastoral areas of northern Kenya, southern Ethiopia and south Somalia the death of livestock on a massive scale has sharpened conflict. Oromo rebels in south and east Ethiopia and Somali secessionists in the east of the country are likely to fight more fiercely. The drought may strengthen the hand of the Islamist Shabab movement, linked to al-Qaeda, in south Somalia; it uses food aid to control the people. Recent cattle raids in northern Kenya have left scores dead, with unprecedented numbers of women and children among the victims. Fighting may intensify until the land becomes greener again.

When will that be? Meteorologists reckon the rains due in October and November will be heavier than usual. That would be good, if the east African authorities were prepared. But they are not. Mud slides and floods are likely, with streams and rivers carrying off the topsoil. Malaria and cholera may increase. Surviving cattle, weakened by drought, will drown or die of cold.

Even the cities--and their economies--will be sorely afflicted, since 95% of Ethiopia's power and 70% of Kenya's is hydroelectric. With rivers down to a trickle or drying up completely, dams are running out of water; some are empty. Turbines have shut down. Electricity throughout east Africa is patchier than usual, just when governments are trying to pep their economies up.

The delayed opening of a big Ethiopian dam capable of producing 300MW has resulted in daily blackouts in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. That, says the government, has reduced economic growth by two percentage points to 7%; others guess that growth has fallen to less than 5%. A British firm, Aggreko, has won a contract to set up electrical generators to supply 30MW to Ethiopia's grid.

The same firm has also signed a deal with Kenya to double the power it temporarily supplies the country, to 290MW. Kenya has been rationing electricity. Most of its townspeople are without power for three days a week. Aggreko will keep more lights on but far more expensively. Small firms and poorer customers may be pushed into the dark.

The high price of food and water is making governments more disliked. The price of maize-meal has more than doubled since 2007. Jerry cans of water, which is often filthy, cost four times more than a year ago. With luck, governments may be forced to improve their management of water. Villagers may be persuaded to build terraces to stop topsoil running off. Dams need better maintenance and desilting. Officials should be shamed into stopping their friends from stealing or wasting water. As the cost of diesel power soars, schemes for renewable power and plans to link the region's power grids may be speeded up. High prices have encouraged some industries to find their own solutions. An Indian cement firm, Sanghi, says it plans to run a new Kenyan cement factory on its own hydroelectric power.

Amid the gloom, a few companies and countries have benefited. Shares in the Kenya Power and Lighting Company have risen this year in expectation of more demand. The main Kenyan power supplier, KenGen, has sold bonds to finance a scheme to expand its output by 500MW. Malawi, which periodically suffered famine until a recent fertiliser-subsidy scheme came good, is to export maize to Kenya.

The drought cycle in east Africa has been contracting sharply. Rains used to fail every nine or ten years. Then the cycle seemed to go down to five years. Now, it seems, the region faces drought every two or three years. The time for recovery--for rebuilding stocks of food and cattle--is ever shorter. And if the rains fail before the end of this year, an unimaginably dreadful catastrophe could ensue.

MAP: Areas short of food

PHOTO (COLOR)

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