

SPECIAL ALERT

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**Late and erratic rains in Eastern Africa raise food security concerns,
El Niño an additional worry**

The outlook for the 2009 crops raises serious concerns following inadequate seasonal rains, conflict and displacement. Late and below average rains, from March to July, in most of Eastern Africa affected agricultural activities and hindered crop growth. The low cumulative rainfall has also led to water shortages in pastoral areas of northern and south-eastern Kenya, south-eastern Ethiopia and inland regions of Djibouti. The current scarcity of adequate pasture has led to worsening body conditions of livestock and consequently reduced good market prospects, directly impacting pastoralists' incomes and their ability to access staple foods. In addition, the reproduction rates of livestock have suffered from successive poor seasonal rains since 2007, making the recovery of pastoral livelihood systems more difficult, and worsening long-term food insecurity.

A positive change in this scenario will very much depend on rainfall conditions in the coming few months. The incidence of El Niño weather phenomenon is closely being monitored around the globe. In Eastern Africa, the occurrence of El Niño usually brings heavy rains towards the end of the year and early into the next one. This usually results in floods and mudslides damaging crops, both in the field and in stores, and increasing the number livestock losses together with damage to infrastructure and housing. For instance, from October 1997 to February 1998, exceptionally heavy rains associated with the El Niño phenomenon caused havoc in most parts of Eastern Africa, with severe floods seriously damaging food production and distribution. In the region as a whole, hundreds of thousands of people were estimated to have been affected. Heavy rainfall and high temperatures will also create a favourable environment for mosquitoes to breed and spread, increasing the prevalence of malaria and Rift Valley fever. Furthermore, historical data indicate that during and after an El Niño phenomenon, cholera outbreaks are common.

Across Eastern Africa prices of maize, a major staple, have shown a declining trend since the beginning of the year, yet remain higher than their pre-crisis levels. In Uganda and Kenya, for instance, prices of maize in June 2009 were almost double their level 24 months earlier. Prices of sorghum, another staple crop, in Khartoum, Sudan in June 2009 were more than double their levels in June 2007. Similarly, prices in Mogadishu, Somalia, still remain higher than the pre-crisis period, despite declining since mid-2008. Given a low household purchasing power, a worsening of the overall food security situation can be expected.

Nearly 20 million people currently depend on food assistance in the region. The above factors are expected to aggravate the situation, especially with respect to marginal farmers, pastoralists and low-income urban dwellers.



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