

Agago, Uganda, 9 March 2011 - Thousands of people in 36 of Uganda's 112 districts are at risk of serious food and water shortages due to drought attributed to the La Niña weather phenomenon.

Health officials have warned of outbreaks of diseases such as diarrhoea and dysentery, due to poor hygiene.

The situation requires urgent attention, says the Minister for Disaster Preparedness, Musa Ecweru. "We are experiencing food shortages; some families are [already] going without food."

The ministry has issued public alerts, warning of impending severe water shortages and famine in parts of the country.

Ecweru said the government was working out ways of securing money for relief food and identifying the worst-hit families.

Forecasts by the meteorological department indicate that the country is headed for a long period of drought. The department has predicted that La Niña conditions, which started in July 2010, will affect rainfall distribution in 2011.

James Magezi, a senior research officer at the meteorological department and assistant commissioner in the Ministry of Water and Environment, told IRIN several parts of the country were likely to experience abnormal rainfall patterns this year, with regions such as northern Uganda and Karamoja completely dry.

Magezi said sunny and dry conditions, characterized by higher-than-normal daytime temperatures, would occur across the country and were likely to continue up to mid-2011.

Poor rainfall

Although some rains are expected in March, Magezi said they were likely to be insufficient to support agriculture in many areas. Wells are already drying up in some of the 36 affected districts, forcing residents to walk long distances in search of water.

Richard Ongom, a resident of Lira Palwo in Agago district, told IRIN: "It takes several hours for the wells to fill up and we have to walk long distances to fetch water from rivers and streams."

He added that high daytime temperatures and strong winds made movement difficult. "The sun is too hot during the day and the blowing winds crack our lips; at night it is impossible to sleep inside the house because of the heat."

The drought-prone Karamoja region, in the northeast, is one of the areas hardest-hit by the La Niña effect, with households struggling to sustain livelihoods. Strong winds are destroying structures and movement is hampered by temperatures ranging from 35 to 38 degrees Celsius

during the day.

In the north, formerly displaced persons resettling in villages in the Acholi districts are experiencing frequent fire outbreaks and falling water levels in rivers.

Oxfam, an international NGO, warned of impending drought in East Africa as well as the Horn of Africa in an update for March, stating that the situation was "deteriorating quickly and could result in a major humanitarian emergency over the coming months".

Response

While noting that governments in the region had recognized the severity of the crisis and initiated remedial measures, Oxfam cautioned that "responses have generally come later than necessary and are focused on emergency measures such as trucking in water and de-stocking animals - buying up cattle that are too weak or low value".

The drought has also affected electricity generation in Uganda as water levels fall in rivers such as the Nile. Streams such as the Aswa, Ayugi, Unyama and Pager, all in Amuru and Kitgum districts, are drying up.

Pastoralists living along the cattle corridors in Nakasongola district and Bullisa, in Bunyoro region, have expressed concern over loss of livelihoods due to the shortage of pasture and water for their livestock.

Food security

Parts of the country were hit by torrential rains in 2010, causing water-logging and rotting of crops, a situation that has now affected food reserves.

"Where shall we get food; last year's harvest was very poor and the little we had we sold to raise money for family needs such as school fees and treatment?" asked James Onyut, a resident of Agago.

Unless the government intervenes, Onyut said, people were going to face tough times. "We pray the rains come early and remain normal so that we can harvest something good from the first season of March-July," Onyut said.

Source: [IRIN](#)