

NAIROBI, 21 July 2011 (IRIN) - At least 500,000 malnourished children in the Horn of Africa's drought-affected areas risk death if immediate help does not reach them, Anthony Lake, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) executive director, has said.

These are the children suffering from severe acute malnutrition, whose clinical signs include swelling in the feet, legs or face caused by an extreme shortage of protein.

"This crisis is likely to deepen over the coming six months or so," Lake told a news conference in Nairobi on 17 July at the end of a visit to the northwestern Turkana region and Dadaab - home to thousands of Somali refugees - in the northeast.

Lake said: "I talked to a mother who was feeding her child pounded palm nuts, with no nutritional value, moistened in her mouth as the local wells have become saline."

Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates of 37 percent have been [recorded in Turkana](#). Malnutrition is described as severe acute or global acute. A GAM value of more than 10 percent generally [signifies an emergency](#).

Across the Horn of Africa, at least [10.7 million people](#) in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia need urgent humanitarian aid due to the drought, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

In Somalia, thousands are fleeing the country or heading to the capital, Mogadishu. An estimated 3,200 Somali refugees are crossing into Kenya and Ethiopia daily.

Desperation

Justin Forsyth, chief executive of Save the Children UK, said: "Over the past few days, I've seen first-hand the enormous suffering the drought is causing in the Daadab refugee camp and across northern Kenya. Families I've met are absolutely desperate for food and water, and we know that the situation in Somalia is even worse."

Humanitarian actors have welcomed a recent statement by the Islamist opposition group in Somalia, Al-Shabab, allowing humanitarian access to south-central regions. Lake said this "will help us to ramp up support".

On 13 July, UNICEF airlifted emergency nutrition and water supplies to Baidoa, southern Somalia, the first time in more than two years, Lake said.

In Mogadishu, doctors with the African Union peacekeeping Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) are

helping to tackle a measles outbreak at a camp for the drought-displaced. Some 9,300 people, who fled their homes in the central and southern regions, arrived in Mogadishu in June, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR.

Lt-Col Kaamurari Katwekyeire, head of AMISOM's Civil-Military Cooperation, said: "The need is great and we can only make small emergency interventions. We hope that humanitarian organizations will take advantage of the improved security situation to come to the aid of the Somali people."

In Kenya, communities neighbouring the refugee camps are complaining about the attention given to the Somali refugees when they are [not faring any better](#).

Lake said: "They [the drought-affected] are suffering what is a perfect storm due to the drought, rising food prices, shortages of the food pipeline... these people live on the edge in any case. This is not just a question about lives being threatened but a way of life being threatened."

The drought has [hit pastoral communities](#) in the arid and semi-arid parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia the hardest.

On 17 July, the UK's international development secretary, Andrew Mitchell, pledged £52.25 million (US\$84 million) in emergency aid for at least one million people in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia.

The aid is in addition to previous support for 1.36 million people in Ethiopia, announced on 3 July. The Ethiopian government launched an appeal on 11 July saying at least 4.56 million drought-affected people needed help.

The new UK funds are for programmes to prevent and treat malnutrition and improve care for refugees in the Daadab and Dolo Ado camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, respectively.

Mitchell called for more international engagement in the Horn of Africa crisis, saying there was a need to prevent a disaster turning into a catastrophe.

"It is a horrible thing in our world today that a baby should die due to a lack of food," he said.

Source: [IRIN](#)