

Health situation deteriorating in Kenyan refugee camp

Aid agencies have sounded warnings as conflict and drought drive people to Dadaab refugee complex. Sharmila Devi reports.



Hospital admissions of children with severe malnutrition in a refugee camp in Kenya have surged as people flee Somalia to escape conflict and drought, with aid agencies warning the situation is likely to worsen amid forecasts of a record sixth consecutive year of failed rains in the region. The UN says the number of people with acute food insecurity almost doubled last year to about 22 million people in the Horn of Africa—4.3 million people in Kenya, 5.6 million in Somalia, and 12.0 million in Ethiopia—and about 1.7 million have been driven from their homes by a lack of water and pasture. About 83% of those displaced across international boundaries have gone to Kenya.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) says that the general malnutrition rate among children has increased by 45% between July and December, 2022, in Dagahaley, one of three refugee camps in the sprawling Dadaab refugee complex in northern Kenya. 233 000 registered refugees and more than 80 000 unregistered refugees live in the camp; more than 50 000 people arrived in 2022 alone. The first camp at Dadaab was created in 1991 when refugees fleeing civil war in Somalia went to Kenya. While successive Kenyan Governments have sought to close the complex, the new President William Ruto has spoken more about integrating refugees into communities.

"There's been a major surge in malnutrition at our 92-bed hospital in Dagahaley and the forecasts for the situation this year aren't much better if more people are displaced by another failed rainy season," Tomas Kral, MSF Humanitarian Affairs Officer in Kenya, told *The Lancet*. "There was a cholera outbreak recently which has slowed but we still get cases every day. Our major concern is hygiene and sanitation but there are needs across the board."

Concern remains high for the region. A formal famine declaration has not been made for Somalia but many aid officials believe it is only a matter of time. "A pickup in funds helped to prevent a famine declaration in December mostly because the USA came to the rescue but this has only delayed the problem because financial resources remain a major issue," said Kral.

Aid funding remains low while the war in Ukraine has driven up food and fuel prices. Climate change was the main driver of food insecurity, which had been compounded by a locust invasion between 2019 and 2021 and the COVID-19 pandemic, Shashwant Saraf, East Africa Emergency Director for the International Rescue Committee, told *The Lancet*. "About 10.8 million cattle have died over the last year and a half and we continue to see depletion of livelihood assets because of drought," he said.

In Kenya, child stunting caused by malnutrition had increased in 23 (49%) of 47 counties and numbers were expected to increase in another seven counties this year, John Otieno, Regional Advocacy Officer for Action Against Hunger, told *The Lancet*. "I've seen what malnutrition means in the field where children are too weak to lift their arms or in hospital where they're on oxygen. Many children are missing vaccines and are anaemic. The psychosocial effects are massive, with lactating women unable to feed their children because they worry about the instability," he said. "We need a long-term plan because children who were treated for malnutrition are ending up having to be treated again."

The protracted nature of east Africa's crisis and donor fatigue have hit the provision of relief to people recently displaced by drought-related causes as well as the many refugees who have

lived in Kenya for years, said a paper by the Migration Policy Institute. "Traditional aid is not designed to address the spiralling interconnections between drought, extreme hunger, and displacement, nor political, economic, and other insecurity further destabilised by a changing climate," the paper said. Aid agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have expanded their activities, including giving food, making cash transfers to pay for food and water, and expanding infrastructure projects such as water points and bore holes, Abdirahman Maalim, head of ICRC's Mombassa office, told *The Lancet*. "We have also arranged community engagement meetings where people say the impact of climate change is their biggest concern because of the challenges to the provision of clean water, food and livelihoods," he said.

Up to 86 million people in sub-Saharan Africa will migrate within their own countries because of climate change by 2050, according to The World Bank, with large numbers in east Africa. "The Horn of Africa is devastated by climate change and we don't know what the future will be," said Maalim.

Sharmila Devi

For the Migration Policy Institute report see <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/east-africa-drought-food-insecurity-refugeesdd9b7b657277e83dc089f51aa2>

