

Horn of Africa: UN steps up efforts to bring urgent relief to millions in need

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) said today it will start airlifts within days to get vital supplies into Somalia, which is bearing the brunt of the humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa, and is preparing to open up a number of new land and air routes to bring urgent relief to millions in need.

The announcement comes a day after the UN declared a famine in two regions of southern Somalia owing to the worst drought in decades, and appealed for urgent resources to provide assistance. It is the first time since 1991-92 that the UN has declared famine in a part of Somalia.



“There is a life and death situation here in Somalia,” WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran said while on a visit to the Somali capital, Mogadishu.

“At one of our feeding sites in Mogadishu, where we are supplying food for hot meals, I met a woman who had lost children as they trekked out of the famine area in search of food,” she added.

Nearly half of the Somali population – 3.7 million people – are now estimated to be in crisis, with an estimated 2.8 million of them in the south.

The agency is currently reaching 1.5 million people in Somalia, and is scaling up to reach an additional 2.2 million people in the previously inaccessible south of the country.

WFP welcomed the recent statement by the insurgent group Al-Shabaab, which controls areas of southern Somalia, that humanitarian aid will now be allowed into those parts of the country.

“We are testing the ground to see how we can best get life-saving supplies in as quickly as possible to those at the epicentre of the famine in the south,” said Ms. Sheeran. “People in the south of Somalia are too ill and weak to go in search of food, so we must bring it to them.”

The agency is getting ready to open up new land and air routes into the core of the famine zone – southern Bakool and Lower Shabelle – to establish the necessary operating conditions, including those that will secure the safety of humanitarian personnel.

“The situation in Somalia is critical,” stressed the WFP chief.

Also visiting Mogadishu today was the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, B. Lynn Pascoe, who was joined by the Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Somalia, Augustine Mahiga.

The visit, intended to show solidarity with the people of Somalia amid the suffering caused by the drought, included meetings with the Somali leadership on a variety of political issues such as the end of the transitional period.

“This is a terrible famine, children are literally dying on the road, there is widespread malnutrition, we are all deeply affected and this will be a huge focus of attention in the months to come,” Mr. Pascoe said at a news conference in Nairobi, Kenya, after his return from Somalia.

“During my trip to Mogadishu the Somali leadership made it very clear that this will be a top priority,” he stated. “They emphasized that help is needed in Mogadishu itself because of the huge number of refugees but are extremely concerned about the situation across the country.”

Ongoing conflict and the recent drought have forced more than 160,000 Somalis to seek help in neighbouring countries so far this year, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Many of them arrive in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya in a very bad state – exhausted, emaciated and severely malnourished.

“They are coming with almost nothing; just the few clothes they have on their back and a few jerry cans,” says UNHCR’s Paul Spiegel, who was recently in Ethiopia’s Dollo Ado area, near the Somalia border, to meet the new arrivals.

Dr. Spiegel, who heads UNHCR’s Public Health and HIV section, said that on average, between 1,500 and 2,000 new people were arriving daily, some after having walked for over one month.

“I have been to many emergencies before – in fact I am just back from a two-month emergency mission in Côte d'Ivoire – but I have not seen such magnitude of death and malnutrition for many, many years,” he stated in an interview published on the agency’s website.

UNHCR has stepped up its efforts in the area to reduce the waiting time for registering new arrivals, to

ensure that people both at the reception and transit centres receive hot meals, and provide special care to children under five who are malnourished as well as pregnant and lactating women.

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