

Southern Africa is experiencing the worst El Niño-induced drought in 35 years

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar - Winding up a nine-day visit to the UK, Malawi and Madagascar, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Kyung-wha Kang called for urgent action by governments and donors to assist millions of people affected by severe drought in the southern Africa region.



Image by 123RF

Southern Africa is experiencing the worst El Niño-induced drought in 35 years. Nearly 40 million people are food insecure, including some 23 million who require urgent humanitarian assistance. About 2.7 million children face severe acute malnutrition. The figure is expected to spike significantly, if immediate assistance is not received, as food insecurity is expected to peak during the October 2016 to March 2017 lean season.

In London, Kang co-chaired a meeting of key donors and agencies on the effects of El Niño in southern Africa, where she urged international donors and development partners to join in efforts to raise the profile of the El Niño crisis facing the region and highlighted the urgency of the response needed.

In the Grand Sud region of Madagascar, a region wholly by-passed by development investment and caught up in chronic extreme poverty, 1.14 million people are food insecure, among whom 665,000 are in need of urgent assistance.

Stunting rates for under-fives are 47% in the country overall: the highest in Southern Africa. In Malawi, a State of National

Disaster was declared in April, with 6.5 million people – nearly 40% of Malawi's population - unable to get enough food by the end of this year.

El Niño-related conditions have compounded existing vulnerabilities, resulting in severe food shortages across southern Africa. Agricultural production has been crippled, and almost half a million drought-related livestock deaths have been reported while water sources and reservoirs are severely depleted. Angola, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe are the most severely affected countries.

Malnutrition

"In Anjampaly, Southern Madagascar, people are carting water from muddy puddles on the dirt road, a water source shared with animals. This is an alarming health issue: clean water is essential to combat the high rates of malnutrition."

Kang met with representatives of the affected communities in both countries and discussed with Government authorities ways of boosting support to national efforts and met with donors as well as humanitarian partners. "In Malawi I spoke to a mother of a three-year-old who could not pass for a one-year-old due to stunting. She told me about the nutritional challenges she is facing and the permanent impact the situation has had on the last born of four children," said Kang.

In Madagascar, she spoke to a grandmother, among 1,200 or so lined up for food distribution. She had lost her son and three grandchildren to starvation earlier this year and has now to care for the remaining family.

Kang thanked governments in the region for their leadership in efforts to mitigate the impact of the drought, but called for more action especially in areas of food assistance, nutrition, maternal and child health, water provision and management, as well as long-term development interventions to build the resilience of communities.

The scale of the drought is stretching national coping capacities. Hard-won development gains and even minimum coping mechanisms hang in the balance. In the Grand Sud of Madagascar, the Ambovombe district, the ASG participated in the early recovery workshop. These efforts need more support.

Building resilience of the communities is crucial to break the recurring cycle of drought and flood emergencies. Humanitarian funding levels in the region are extremely low and partners continue to face significant resource gaps.

In both countries Kang witnessed well-coordinated and much appreciated relief efforts by UN agencies and NGOs, but they need urgently more resources to step up their efforts. "I appeal to governments and donors to give generously right now, so that we can provide life-saving assistance, alleviate suffering and prepare for the effects of La Niña."

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