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UN pleads for aid as millions of Kenyans face starvation

Western tourists still 'oblivious' to looming disaster in east Africa

Inigo Gilmore in Shimba Hills and Anthony Mitchell in El Wak

The United Nations food agency will run out of the supplies it needs to keep 3.5 million drought-stricken Kenyans alive because it has received just over a tenth of the required funding, officials said this week.

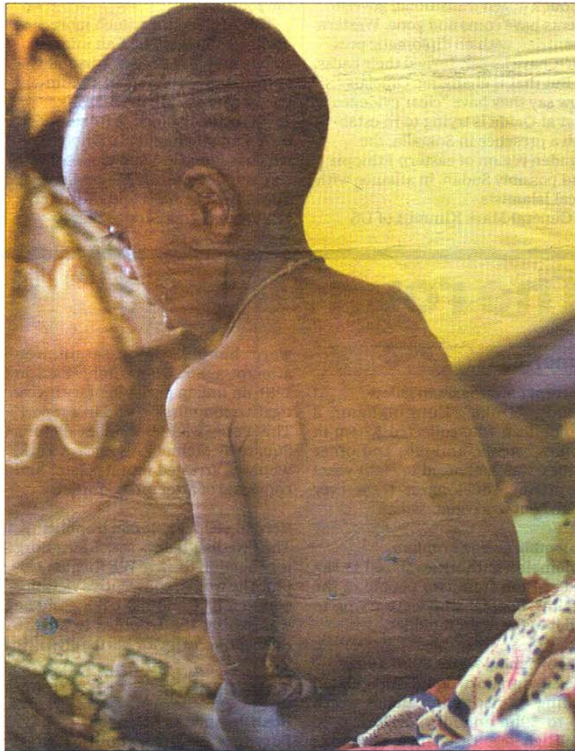
The situation in El Wak and other parts of Kenya was "as bad as it gets", said James Morris, the executive director of the World Food Programme. "There is just no alternative if lives are going to be saved — the world has to provide food," he said.

Dozens of people are reported to have died from hunger, and chronic malnutrition is widespread in north-eastern and eastern Kenya, but the government has not given any figures, even though it has declared the situation a famine.

The programme has cereals to last until next month, but will run out of the less important vegetable oil and pulses earlier. "We will urgently need more help in the next 10 days because it takes time to buy, ship and distribute food," Mr Morris said last weekend. "These people have run out of water and food. Unless we reach them all very soon they will run out of time."

The WFP said it was grateful for the recent support extended by donors — more than \$25m has been pledged to Kenya since January — but the agency still requires \$189m for its year-long emergency operation.

It is a crisis going on under the noses of tourists still travelling to wildlife parks. Along the rutted road from the elephant sanctuary at Shimba Hills National Park, hundreds of gaunt villagers gathered on a sun-baked football field. Sacks of maize had been brought in by truck and, as helpers poured out small bags of corn and handed them to



A malnourished boy in El Wak, Kenya Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

those waiting in long queues, women scabbled to salvage a few extra grains for their families.

These are the two faces of Kenya, a country that relies on tourism and happy tourists to bolster its economy, yet beset by a growing humanitarian disaster threatening to undermine that economic progress and to kill many of its people.

The drought has turned a swath of eastern Africa into a dustbowl and left almost 12 million people dependent on aid, the UN said.

While Kenya's drought epicentre is still the northeast, where the country borders Ethiopia and Somalia, it has

been encroaching on areas such as this, just an hour south of the beach resorts of Mombasa. The last time it rained was in December, but that was for barely two hours, and prior to that it had been five months.

Mr Morris expressed concern about the impact of the drought on neighbouring Somalia, where access to 1.4 million Somalis in need of emergency food aid in the south is difficult due to insecurity. The catastrophe is also threatening to engulf Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Ochi Layawa echoed the stories of many others as she described how one morning last week she had

walked for two hours, leaving her eight children at home, and waited eight hours in the searing sun at the football field near Kinango. Her crops had withered and her goats were dead, she said.

"For the past eight years we've had no real harvest but this year the situation is much worse because we used to get food in other towns. But now there was no rain in the whole district, no water, no food."

In a village nearby there were even more desperate stories, including testimonies from Masai herders who had travelled more than 30km in search of food. All around, the dams where their animals should have been watered were dried out.

An exhausted elderly woman sitting in the dirt, her legs swollen with elephantiasis, told how she had not eaten for two days. A woman sitting next to her had resorted to eating bark, soil and tree roots. "What else could I do?" she asked. "We are starving."

Such scenes are a world away from the lavish lunches served up at the safari lodges of Shimba Hills. Earlier this month the Nation, a leading daily newspaper, welcomed news that 350 British tourists had visited the park as a sign that tourism was burgeoning. There was no mention that the pensioners, on a Saga holiday, were in a drought disaster zone.

The government is trucking in emergency food aid, with some donor assistance, and Ruth Kwekwe, assistant district commissioner in Kinango, was angry that tourists were not being told about the emergency.

A cycle is developing that will be hard to break. The lack of water has killed thousands of animals. Without livestock or crops, and with businesses dying too, people cannot afford their children's school fees. The problem is compounded by environmental degradation. Local people flout the law by cutting down trees, burning them for charcoal and selling the fuel at \$1 a bag — anything to make a living. With climate change contributing to the sustained drought, there are fears many will have to rely on food aid and water relief for years to come. *Observer*



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