



AFRICAN NATION NIGER FACES FAMINE

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Efforts to save the lives of nearly 1 million starving children in the West African nation of Niger are under way, with international relief agencies rushing to distribute food.

Media images over the last few weeks of Niger's emaciated children -- an estimated 150,000 of them near death -- have roused foreign governments to pledge millions of dollars.

The United Nations and other organizations will use the money to deliver necessary supplies such as flour, oil, rice, peas and enriched biscuits.

Amidou Abou couldn't wait any longer. He sold the last of his sheep herd for \$13 to feed his family. Before the crisis, he would have netted \$90.

"My child has been hospitalized at the nutritional center. What do you want me to do?" he told an Associated Press reporter.

Food shortages in West Africa

A severe drought and a rare invasion of locusts wiped out much of Niger's food crop last year and led to the start of a famine affecting an estimated 3.6 million people in the mostly desert country of 11.3 million people.

Niger is one of the world's poorest countries.

The famine worsened an already serious situation, in which one in four children under the age of 5 dies each year of hunger and poverty.

Niger's neighbors are also facing a crisis. In Mali, an estimated 1.1 million people are in need of food. About 5,000 children are suffering from malnutrition, and death rates among young children have hit record highs, according to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs or OCHA.

About 500,000 people in Burkina Faso, Niger's southwestern neighbor, also need food. Thousands of families have left their homes in search of something to eat.

Mauritania, next door to Mali, also is experiencing food shortages due to drought.

All three countries sit along the semi-arid strip of land south of the Sahara and north of the Sudan region known as the Sahel. The region receives the same amount of rain as the driest parts of the United States – around 6 to 20 inches of rainfall a year.

The region's inhabitants, mostly nomadic farmers and cattle herders, survive by taking their herds north during the driest season and south during the rainy season.

Calls for aid

While help has begun pouring into the region, some aid workers and government officials in Niger claim hundreds of lives could have been saved if action was taken sooner.

Calls for emergency assistance from the government nine months ago and U.N. appeals for aid to West Africa, were largely ignored before the media picked up on the story, U.N. officials have said.

Of the \$196 million the United Nations requested for West Africa for 2005, the organization received only 39 percent of the funds, Kristen Knutson, an OCHA spokeswoman, told the Associated Press.

Now, refugee camps around Niger are brimming with starving people.

Agencies, such as Doctors Without Borders and the World Food Program, warn that the upcoming rainy season could bring diseases like malaria and pneumonia.

Last week, the United Nations said it would begin airlifting 44 tons of emergency food to Niger.

Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, has already given donated 1,000 tons of grain to its neighbor.

The United States has pledged about \$6 million to the famine.

-- Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for NewsHour Extra

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