

# Millions face hunger in arid belt of Africa

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In this Tuesday, May 11, 2010 photo, taken following a sandstorm, nomadic tribal chief Ibrahim Mangari walks past the carcass of a cow that he says died of hunger, in Gadabeji, Niger. At this time of year, the Gadabeji Reserve should be a refuge for the nomadic tribes who travel across the moonscape deserts of Niger to graze their cattle. But the grass is meager, not enough even for the small goats, after a drought killed off the last year's crops. International aid groups once again warn this nation of 15 million on the verge of the Sahara Desert faces a growing food crisis.(AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

(AP) -- At this time of year, the Gadabeji Reserve should be refuge for the nomadic tribes who travel across a moonscape on the edge of the Sahara to graze their cattle. But the grass is meager after a drought killed off the last year's crops. Now the cattle are too weak to stand and too skinny to sell, leaving the poor without any way to buy grain to feed their families.

The threat of famine is again stalking the Sahel, a band of semiarid land stretching across Africa south of the [Sahara](#). The U.N. World Food

Program warned on Friday that some 10 million people face hunger over the next three months before the next harvest in September - if it comes.

"People have lost crops, livestock, and the ability to cope on their own, and the levels of malnutrition among women and children have already risen to very high levels," said Thomas Yanga, WFP Regional Director for West [Africa](#).

The U.N.'s humanitarian chief, John Holmes, said at the end of a four-day visit to neighboring Chad that many Chadians have gone as far as Libya to search for food.

"The level of malnutrition is already beyond the danger point," Holmes said Thursday. "If we do not act now or as quickly as possible, there is a chance the food crisis will become a disaster."

In Niger, some say the growing food crisis could be worse than the one that struck the country in 2005, when aid organizations treated tens of thousands of children for malnutrition.

"We have lost so much we cannot count," said one 45-year-old tribesman with a family of 20 to feed. He and others on Gadabeji Reserve drive starving donkeys through the burnt orange haze of a sandstorm to gather what little water they can on the desiccated plain and struggle to draw water from private wells.

Famine is nothing new to Niger, a former French colony nearly twice the size of Texas. The Sahel cuts through the middle of the country, serving as the dividing line between the sands of the Sahara and the lush farmlands of neighboring Nigeria to the south. Severe droughts have punctuated the region's history for centuries.

Yet outside of uranium mining, agriculture serves as the sole economic

engine for a country where just more than a quarter of the population knows how to read. Generation after generation follows worn seasonal tracks, their belongings often fitted onto a single donkey-driven pallet.

Typically, the herders move south at the onset of December, searching for grazing lands. But this year they found only dried lakes and diminishing wells, said Hasane Baka, a regional administrator for AREN, a Nigerien development group for cattlemen.

"People were moving in all directions," Baka said.

Some have crossed into Nigeria, begging for food on the streets of the northern city of Katsina. Others remain behind with their cattle, knowing the livestock would die on a long trip south that could end with Nigerian police simply turning them back. Instead, they wait for rains that might not come.

Those who remain drive their cows into Dakoro, the largest and closest city for nomadic cattlemen. At the open-air market, the ribs of some cattle are starkly visible against their hides. Others die along the road or in trucks on the way.

"You can see the skin and bones of much of them," said trader Ibrahim Tarbanassa, 68.

A single cow once sold for the equivalent of \$200. Now, some go for as little as \$120 - if they sell at all. Food prices remain high after speculators cornered the already poor harvest last year.

Even in better times, roughly half of Niger's children suffered stunted growth. Now, mothers walk their children as far as 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) to reach one of two aid stations operated by Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without Borders, said Barbara Maccagno, the

agency's medical coordinator in Niger. The two stations now see about 1,000 children a week, some two or three times underweight, Maccagno said. The number of admissions has doubled in recent weeks.

"It's very hot and without any food available to the family, we're afraid we'll see more," she said.

Maccagno said her agency could offer children meals of vitamin-enriched powdered milks and other foods to help bring a child's weight up, but many children need up to five weeks to gain a stable weight. During that time, the mother must stay with the child, impossible for those who left other children behind, she said.

Other agencies like Oxfam hand out cereals and grains directly to nomadic families living in the bush, but money for such aid is short because of the global economic downturn. The WFP said it has a \$96 million shortfall for a program it planned for 1.5 million people in the worst-hit areas of Niger.

Niger's government, now being run by a military council after a February coup ousted President Mamadou Tandja, has said it will provide more than 21,000 tons of food. In 2005, Tandja played down a similar [food crisis](#), dismissing it as "false propaganda" used by the U.N., aid agencies and opposition parties for political and economic gain.

Each drought and crisis ends up gaining its own name. In 2005, traders and nomads began to refer to the crisis as the Tandja famine.

There's no name yet for the drought now facing the country. Many can only wait in a nation that faces cyclical hunger without an end in sight.

"Every time, it's the same situation," Maccagno said.

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