

NEWS

Starvation at Christmas

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DEVASTATION: A scene in Elwak, Mandera, littered with carcasses of cows and goats. Photo by Peter Kimani



Ibrahim Kula, 13, at the Mandera district hospital, where he is being treated for pulmonary tuberculosis and malnutrition . Photo by Peter Kimani



An emergency feeding centre in Elwak. Photos by Peter Kimani

Thousands of Kenyans are facing a slow death from starvation, while the rest of our country is planning to eat and drink its way through a very merry Christmas.

Two seasons of failed rains in Mandera and outlying districts have left death and devastation in their wake. Cows and goats that are so treasured by the pastoralists – seen as a source of wealth and health, providing meat and milk – are now carcasses for packs of dogs and lie strewn about village paths.

DEVASTATION: A scene in Elwak, Mandera, littered with carcasses of cows and goats. Photo by Peter Kimani

Up to 30 per cent of their herds have been lost so far, and Mandera Central MP Billow Kerrow says, "there will be nothing called cattle in the district in January."

There are worse fears for the residents, all of whom rely on the animals for survival, and now have nothing to eat. They, too, are dying in droves. Twelve people have been confirmed dead in Elwak, some 200 kilometres south of Mandera township, while many others face imminent death if help is not offered soon.

In the few hospitals and dispensaries in the district, children cry, clutching at their swollen bellies. Others are too weak to cry; they whimper and stare into space, awaiting their time to die.

The old lie there too, their bones frail and voices weak. The only sign of life left in them, is in their eyes. And these are slowly receding into their sockets.

Yet incredibly, those are the lucky ones. For many are too sick to walk to dispensaries to seek help, and a trip to the nearest health centre may take several days.

Ibrahim Kula, 13, at the Mandera district hospital, where he is being treated for pulmonary tuberculosis and malnutrition . Photo by Peter Kimani

"By the time people come to the hospital, they are very down," says Mandera district medical officer of health, Dr Boniface Musila, who says the district hospital serves people in a radius of 300 kilometres.

The most common ailments there are severe respiratory infections, diarrhoea and dehydration, made all the worse by malnutrition.

Dr Musila says 10 people died in the district through hunger-related

illnesses in this month alone.

And although doctors say they have not turned anyone away, and some health centres and dispensaries have been converted into wards, their capacity is limited. So many more are suffering in silence in their homes.

A visit yields in every homestead a child or an adult who is too hungry to walk – and plenty of tears are being spilt for dead animals, but none for the people.

An emergency feeding centre in Elwak. Photos by Peter Kimani

"People starving is not news any more," says Mr Kerrow, " People just bury their dead and move on."

Mr Kerrow says high schools might not have any students in January as parents dependent on livestock may not be able to pay fees or food for their children.

"It's like losing your farm. That's all one has to live on," he said.

The only salvation, Mr Kerrow says, lies in the Government coming to the children's rescue by setting aside some money to ensure they stay in school.

That might be unlikely, if his frequent calls for relief food are anything to go by. He says he sounded the warning months ago, but the first shipment of food is yet to make its way to Government silos in the district.

Mandera DC Waweru Kimani says 5,000 bags of maize and 2,000 bags of beans were expected from the Rift Valley, where farmers have a surplus that could save the lives of their fellow citizens.

For now, the residents rely on feeding centres set up by non-governmental organisations, but their reach is limited, and so are their resources.

Under stunted cactus trees, old men clutch their walking-sticks and stroke their beards, wondering if they will live another day, as women and children sit and contemplate their future only yards away.

They don't know it's Christmas, yet. The time of goodwill and feasting.