
AGLI - Report from Kenya - March 21, 2010

Famine or Feast!

[Note: AGLI has a new webpage for the Burundi Early Warning Project. Please have a look at <http://burundi.friendsobserve.org>

Dear All,

On February 13 last year I posted a Report from Kenya titled, Famine in Kenya. Here is part of what I wrote:

Last year the dry season here in Lumakanda began quite early, in late November. Not only did it not rain, as expected in the dry season, but the sun beat down bright and shinny almost everyday with a fierce wind blowing; sometimes all night long. There was dust everywhere! All the grass turned brown and the cows, goats, and sheep were beginning to get quite thin. Would they make it to the beginning of the next rainy season in March?

Lumakanda is in a well-watered, high elevation, about 6000 feet above sea level. Other parts of Kenya are at a lower elevation which means that less rain falls there and that which does fall evaporates faster because of the higher temperature. The usual short rains of October and November completely failed in the drier, eastern parts of Kenya. The Government announced that 3 million people needed food aid. Later this estimate was raised to 10 million, almost 30% of the population of Kenya. So, expensive corn (maize) was imported, there was a corruption scandal in the corn milling business, and Mombasa port has been unable to handle the extra food that needs to be imported. In the drier, pastoral areas, cows, sheep, goats, and camels were dying from hunger. People were not far behind. The Government of Kenya has asked the international community to help with famine relief. Kenyans are encouraged to donate to hunger relief programs; some staff of the Daily Nation

climbed Mt. Kenya as a fundraiser for famine relief.

Then, at the end of January when it is supposed to be the dry season, it rained. Rather, it poured for about a week, not only here in Lumakanda, but throughout much of Kenya. The brown grass here in Lumakanda quickly turned green again and the animals had enough grass to eat. But the rain did not allow for planting because the dry season soon returned and again it is quite sunny and windy here in Lumakanda and in the rest of Kenya.

The short rainy season which often fails to bring adequate rain in Kenya starts in mid-October and goes to December. The meteorologists predicted good rains because El Nino was coming. During the El Nino weather pattern, Kenya gets more rain than usual. In 1998, the country was flooded so much that 10% of the infrastructure was destroyed! The Government encouraged everyone to plant, subsidizing the corn seed and fertilizer. Eastern Kenya, which had taken the brunt of the previous drought, received the best rains they had in decades during this growing season. They had a bumper harvest.

So what has happened in the past year? Middle to end of March through May or June is the long rainy season here. This is when people usually get the best harvests. Here in Lumakanda the rains during this period were adequate. People got a decent harvest. As we would drive thirty miles east towards Eldoret, the corn would get shorter and shorter and shorter until by the time we reached Eldoret it was only a foot high. Clearly the harvest there was a total bust. This was the situation in most of Kenya east of us. In the arid northern and northeastern parts of Kenya hardly any rain fell at all. Cow and other livestock (goats, sheep, and camels) died by the hundreds of thousands. The price of an emaciated cow was almost nothing. These people had nothing to eat nor money to buy food and so they received a good deal of food aid. For most of Kenya the long rainy season was a disaster.

The lack of rain had another consequence; even for us here in Lumakanda. Under normal conditions over 50% of the electricity in Kenya is generated by hydropower. But with little or no rains, the lakes behind the dams that generate the electricity began to fall. In some cases the levels fell so much that electric generation had to stop. First this led to many blackouts—up

through August; Lumakanda was blacked out at least two days per week. In order to continue to supply some electricity the electric company began to buy electricity from diesel generators which is about the most expensive method of generating electricity. Consequently everyone's electric bill almost doubled for the same amount of electricity.

Did this turn out well? No, since feast is almost as bad as famine. There was so much corn that the price plummeted. There was so much corn that there were no storage facilities to take care of it. Moreover the good rains had washed out many of the rural roads so that farmers could not get their crop to market.

The Government buys corn at a good price for storage in the country's grain reserves. In order to get the Government to buy this corn, it has to be dried to a certain percentage so it will not spoil while in storage. Before the corn could dry enough, in February, which is traditionally one of the driest months of the year, deluges of rain fell for about two weeks. The corn was unable to dry and rotted in the field.

These unusual February rains—Alfred Machayo, a local Quaker farmer told me he had never seen that much rain in February in his (long) life—were the ones responsible for the mudslide in Bududa, Uganda, that killed an estimated 300 to 400 people. This is about half the number killed in the earthquake in Chile. I would be interested to know whether people in America and elsewhere even heard about this mudslide, which according to the media, was in a very remote place. Since Barbara Wybar has been developing the AGLI supported Bududa Vocational Institute and the Children of Peace orphans program, and since I can see that part of Mt. Elgon around Bududa from our kitchen window, I don't consider it remote at all—just over there about 50 miles as the crow flies.

Then the rains brought another problem. During the drought there was not sufficient milk in the country. Its price increased and powdered milk was imported to cover the deficit. The downpours changed the situation and suddenly there was too much milk - more than the dairies could handle - so, since it must be processed immediately, lots of milk was just poured down the drain. As would be expected the price paid to farmers for the milk also declined.

In conclusion, while famine is bad, feasting also has its set of problems. Perhaps sometime the weather, like in Camelot, "must be perfect all the year".

Peace,
Dave

New webpage: www.aglifpt.org

New email: dave@aglifpt.org

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