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Somalia's Famine-Affected Area Expands

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington — Famine conditions are creeping across southern Somalia, reports an analysis group, with six regions of the country now affected and 750,000 people now facing “imminent starvation.”

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) issued its latest findings on the extent of the hardships in Eastern Africa September 5. FEWS NET is an analysis group that predicted the likelihood of famine more than a year ago, based on careful study of rainfall, growing conditions and crop yields. With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), FEWS NET works with the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU), a U.N.-backed entity, to monitor about 30 famine-prone nations and alert the international aid community to the possible development of humanitarian crisis situations.

The FEWS NET-FSNAU report adds the Bay region of southern Somalia to the list of regions previously declared at risk of famine, including districts of Lower and Middle Shabelle regions, the Afgoye corridor, and the internally displaced persons who have descended on Mogadishu in search of help because of insufficient supplies in their home villages.

The report finds that a total of 4 million people in Somalia are in crisis, with 750,000 “at risk of death in the coming four months in the absence of adequate response.” That estimate of the number of people in crisis has increased from 3.7 million in July. Tens of thousands of people have already died, and the report says that 3.3 million are in need of lifesaving assistance. It predicts that famine conditions will grip all areas of southern Somalia within the next few months.

While malnutrition and the potential for famine are most serious in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti are also facing severe food shortages. More than 12 million people are estimated to be in need across the four nations.

The United States is the single largest donor nation providing assistance. The U.S. commitment for aid donations topped \$600 million with a new contribution of \$23 million announced by USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah August 31. In large part, this assistance is passed on to U.N. and humanitarian organizations providing direct relief services. A USAID fact sheet says the latest assistance will “help treat severely malnourished children, improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities, and expand health surveillance and disease prevention efforts.” In addition, some of the funds flow directly to community members when they are hired

to assist in aid efforts, thereby boosting cash flow in the communities.

The worst drought the region has experienced in about 20 years and subsequent crop failures have led to hardships that touch the lives of close to 12.5 million people in Eastern Africa. One chart in the FEWS NET-FSNAU September 5 report puts 2011 cereal harvests in the region at about 55,000 metric tons, compared to a 2010 harvest of about 325,000 tons.

Many people in this region are pastoralists, raising herds of animals — mostly goats, cattle and sheep — as a source of both income and nutrition. But dry conditions have laid brown much of the region, so these herders have traveled unusually long distances to find grazing for their animals in areas where the land supports a little more vegetation. But that has grouped too many animals on areas with limited pasture and water.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that herds will suffer a mortality rate as high as 60 percent in cattle, 40 percent in sheep and about 30 percent in goats, although no official calculation of losses has been conducted. Losses of such a magnitude would have “profound impact at the household and national economic levels,” according to a situation report from the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

U.N. Set for Global Campaign Against Fatal Diseases

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer

Washington — The United Nations General Assembly is ready to launch a full-fledged assault on some of the world's greatest killers.

They aren't terrorists or drug kingpins. They are diseases: heart disease, respiratory disease, cancer and diabetes. They are known as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) because they aren't passed by bugs or sneezes, coughs or sex. They are diseases that many people bring on themselves with lifestyle choices like smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity and alcohol abuse.

Communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and pandemic influenza attract a lot of attention, but the NCDs are more deadly, accounting for 63 percent of all deaths worldwide, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

The U.N. General Assembly will convene a special session on NCDs September 19–20 in New York with the goal of adopting an action plan for the international health community to attack the problem.

This session emerges from the growing realization that premature deaths from these health problems impede

economic development. These diseases can entrench an individual or a family in poverty because of the inability to work or the cost of medical treatment. Expand those individual difficulties to a broader scale, and they can inhibit national economic progress. The global cost of NCDs from 2005 to 2030 is estimated at \$35 trillion, according to a World Bank study.

U.N. documents say the special session is scheduled because of evidence proving that strategies to reduce NCDs are going to be a “best buy” for national investment.

“If a minister of health had \$1 million to improve the health of his people, where should he invest?” said Dr. Roger I. Glass, who has been involved in a global review of disease control as director of the Fogarty International Center at the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). “What would be the ‘best buys’ to get the maximum improvement in life expectancy and disability-adjusted life years?”

Glass said experts have found that investing in strategies to educate people about the risks of NCDs and the lifestyle choices that promote poor health are the best investments a country can make. In an interview, Glass said the need for attention to NCDs has become increasingly urgent as populous nations like India and China have made great strides in prolonging life expectancy. The over-40 age groups are typically more prone to suffer from the long-term habits that lead to NCDs, but WHO data reveals that a significant proportion – 30 percent – of deaths under age 60 result from these conditions.

The forthcoming U.N. session is an important event to emphasize these diseases, Glass said, because the lengthy incubation periods of the NCDs allow them to slip from the spotlight of public attention. “The urgency isn’t nearly as captivating as a new viral infection.”

Despite their enormous consequences, NCDs are largely preventable, and the U.N. session will develop strategies on how to emphasize that point to the global public. Breaking bad lifestyle habits such as tobacco use, poor diet, physical inactivity and alcohol abuse can significantly reduce the toll of NCDs. If these major risk factors were eliminated, calculates the WHO, about 75 percent of cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes would be prevented, and 40 percent of cancer would be prevented.

When the NCDs were recognized as health “best buys” a few years ago, Glass said, the Fogarty International Center adjusted its focus to devote about half its resources to this area. The center supports basic, clinical and applied research and training for U.S. and international

investigators. Fogarty established new partnerships to pursue NCD research with international institutions. Fogarty also advised and supported the National Heart, Blood and Lung Institute, another division of NIH, in a project to establish 11 centers in low- and middle-income countries devoted to research and professional training for cardiovascular and pulmonary disease.

A U.S. partnership with Costa Rican cancer researchers in recent years expanded scientific understanding of cervical cancer and developed the HPV vaccine, which can prevent this form of cancer. Administration of the vaccine “is now part of the system of health care in the United States,” said Dr. Jorge Gomez, director of the Office of Latin American Cancer Program Development, “and has been incorporated into basic health plans and benefits.”

Gomez is establishing a network of cancer researchers in the United States and five Latin American countries. A study of breast cancer in women in those five nations is getting under way, which will provide more data about the disease in this population than has ever been collected before.

Glass said this international research partnership may serve as a model for other collaborations that will result because of the U.N. focus on NCD issues. “There’s a lot we can learn from working together.” Fogarty has pursued that research philosophy for more than 40 years, facilitating exchanges among global health researchers, providing training opportunities and supporting promising research initiatives in developing countries.

The U.N. General Assembly held a special session to focus on a disease – HIV/AIDS – only one time before. Glass said global collaboration and progress against the disease took an important step forward with that meeting, and he hopes that history might be repeated September 19–20.

Nancy Ip Chose Science with Her Heart

By Jane Morse | Staff Writer

Nancy Ip is one of the participants in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum’s Women and the Economy Summit, which takes place September 13–16 in San Francisco.

Washington – Years ago, when Nancy Ip attended secondary school in Hong Kong, science was not considered a suitable career path for women, and there were few role models to emulate. But her curiosity in biological sciences brought her joy in learning and discovering new things.

“I chose to follow my heart and have never looked back,” she said.

Today Ip is the dean of science and director of the State

Key Laboratory of Molecular Neuroscience at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, where she works to develop Hong Kong into a leading research hub in Asia. "This has been a formidable task since Hong Kong was known more as a financial center rather than for its research and development capabilities," she said.

She co-founded the Asia-Pacific International Molecular Biology Network to promote the continued advancement of molecular biology and biotechnology in Asia, served on the board of directors of the Hong Kong Science and Technology Parks Corporation, and participates in the Chinese Academy of Sciences to provide advice on science policy at the national level.

Ip also promotes molecular neuroscience in Hong Kong through her research. "The brain is the most complex organ in our body, and there is much that is still unknown about the mechanisms underlying its neural processes," she said. "Through my research, I aim to understand the manner in which nerve cells communicate in the brain.

"Some of my research highlights include the identification of novel neurotrophic factors, which are proteins that promote the survival, development and maintenance of brain cells, and the elucidation of their functional roles in the nervous system. My work has underscored the importance of neurotrophic factors as potential pharmaceutical agents in the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease," she said.

Ip acknowledges that mentors played a huge part in her education and career. Her parents and teachers encouraged her. "In my undergraduate and post-graduate studies," she said, "I had the honor to work with distinguished scientists, such as my Ph.D. thesis adviser, who gave me sound advice and provided me with equal opportunities and a supportive environment to build my career."

ENCOURAGING THE NEXT WOMEN SCIENTISTS

Ip says women should not be intimidated by those who might discourage them from pursuing a career in science. "It is true that science is a demanding profession, which requires years of study and dedication with no guarantee of success," she said. "But it is also a highly rewarding and satisfying line of work because at the end of the day, the fruits of one's efforts go towards enhancing and improving lives."

It is essential, Ip said, for young women to seek out mentors, especially during the early stages of their scientific careers. "Mentors provide support, encouragement and invaluable guidance on research and career paths. Young women should also be encouraged to

join professional women's organizations in science and technology, as these also provide invaluable support as well as host forums on essential career-related topics," she said.

Juggling a family with a career is difficult, Ip said, but institutions and scientific bodies in many countries are implementing policies such as flexible grants, flexible work hours and child-care services, among others, to place working mothers on an equal footing with their male counterparts.

"In short, I have one word of advice to all young women aspiring to be scientists: perseverance," she said. "Persevere and be prepared to pursue their dreams with focused enthusiasm and drive."

Ip was nominated by the Trade and Industry Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government to participate in the Women in the Economy Summit to be held in San Francisco September 13-16.

She hopes to bring back strategies to encourage women interested in pursuing careers in science to follow their dreams. "Encouraging more women to pursue science as a career is a topic that is close to my heart," she said.

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