

Drought in Africa adds pressure to religious groups, relief organizations

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NAIROBI, Kenya (RNS) Churches in eastern and southern Africa are appealing for humanitarian aid in the region, as 36 million people grapple with the worst drought in decades.

Linked to extreme El Niño weather conditions, the drought has affected several countries, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, Malawi, and Zimbabwe. The conditions have reversed normal weather patterns, upsetting people's livelihoods.

"In parts of Somaliland, where people live on livestock and agriculture, the problem is serious," said Georgio Bertin, a Roman Catholic bishop in Djibouti, a country in the horn of Africa.

In 2011, a drought made worse by Islamic terrorism forced thousands of Somalis into a refugee complex in northeastern Kenya.

"We are intervening," said Bertin, who is relying on the help of Caritas, the Catholic relief organization. "We are providing food to very poor families. It is a gesture of solidarity."

More than 10 million people face hunger in Ethiopia. Agencies are also racing to save the country from falling into a famine similar to the 1983-1985 one, which killed an estimated 1 million people.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Ethiopia said nine dioceses are affected by what they see as the worst-ever effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

“The severity of the situation is continuously increasing the number of people affected,” said Berhaneyesus D. Souraphiel, a cardinal and archbishop of Addis Ababa.

In February, Martin Mtumbuka, a Malawian bishop in the Karonga Diocese, stopped taking tithes and offerings due to the drought.