

Severe drought brings starving Kenyans to church doorsteps

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [March 1, 2017](#) issue

When her pantry is empty, Agnes Mwikali walks down a dusty road to the local Roman Catholic Church mission. There, beyond the metal gate and the church garden where the crops are withering, she steps into the administration building and asks for a four-pound bag of cornmeal.

In Thatha, her home about 93 miles northeast of Nairobi, a severe drought has left many families without food, water, or pasture for their livestock. Mwikali, a 40-year-old mother, has watched as extreme temperatures have destroyed crops, drained water sources, and laid grazing fields to waste.

“We are trying everything,” she said. “There are many of us. Many families don’t have enough food.”

Mwikali has 14 mouths to feed; her children range in age from 23 years old to three months. She has supported herself by weeding, herding, or fetching water. But that kind of work has become scarce during the drought.

“The rains are our greatest disappointment,” she said. “Every season, we plant our seeds and watch the crops germinate, only for the rains to leave before they mature.”

At the Thatha Roman Catholic Mission, part of the Machakos Diocese, Gerard Matolo increasingly sees more people seeking help.

“You can’t tell them that there is nothing,” Matolo said. “As their shepherd, I have to find a way to ensure they get something to eat. Sometimes I share my own food.”

Matolo estimates that nearly 3,000 people in his parish urgently need food aid. About 30,000 are at risk. A bag of cornmeal or a bottle of oil would make a difference for a family, but there is little available.

The last time this region received the needed level of rainfall was seven years ago. Matolo has been storing the little food he gets as part of the agricultural tithe that small farmers and others have traditionally given the mission. But unless things

change, Matolo fears, soon cows, goats, sheep, and donkeys will start dying.

The severe drought in East Africa is largely attributed to climate change. The recurrent droughts have taken a heavy toll on religious leaders as they move to aid communities threatened by starvation. The current drought has hit Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, disrupting livelihoods for millions of people.

According to religious leaders, the battles against the drought have been fierce and draining, and governments are not doing enough. Experts warn that the situation may persist for the next six months.

“The drought is of great concern to us as Muslims,” said Sheikh Hassan Ole Naado, the deputy secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims. “We are praying, and we are mobilizing.”

Kenya’s government has been delivering relief food to nearly 1.6 million in arid and semiarid areas. Officials say the number would surpass 2 million in early March.

Meanwhile, Matolo and many other faith leaders in East Africa continue to stress better farming methods and increased water harvesting.

“When I see the people starving, I feel desperate; I also feel disappointed that many of the promises by government officials to deliver water have not been honored,” Matolo said. “If these people can get water for irrigation, the area will become the country’s breadbasket. They are doing it in Israel, which is a desert. Here, the soils are very fertile, and the people are not lazy.” —Religion News Service

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