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Afar region's current crises: the way forward and development news

July 17th 2011

- Volcanic eruption + drought

Afar Region's most vulnerable – those living in the drought-belt - were hit with an additional crisis on June 12th when a volcanic peak erupted in Eritrea scattering ash over a wide east - west frontier from Sudan to the Arab Gulf. Locally, ash settled waist-deep poisoning water sources and stopping animals from grazing aside from those killed by flung-rocks, the vast lava flow and the gases that overcame many. The 3 eruptions happened along the farming valley of Siddalu that is part of Bidu, Ethiopia's border woreda that extends into Eritrea. Over a month on from the first eruption, the 3rd volcano, Ra'a is still putting out lava and gas while Kulkuli and Basa'a have now died down. Affected communities of the 8 kebeles surrounding Bidu are estimated by the woreda government as 9,806 people. APDA visited their woreda administration and found 210 people – mainly women and children who had walked from 6 to 9 nights to reach the settlement of Soddonta. They described being blinded by the gas and ash, unable to drink water as it is now poisonous, all animals are assumed lost, even pack animals, people are highly separated. Eritrea government has tried to take them to Assab but many refused, according to those fleeing the area. Up to 10 people are arriving daily. While APDA did not see any malnutrition around among the arrivals, they come in shock, thirst, and total body exhaustion. Affected people suffer burning eyes, chest and throat inflammation, abdominal cramps and bloody diarrhea. The arrivals are unable to detail the number of deaths as a result of the eruption: one man spoke of seeing 5 people dead, another 4, mostly killed by falling rocks and another spoke of many who had died of thirst fleeing the area.

The current assistance to these people includes transported water up until August and supplementary food contributed by other NGOs. The urgency is to secure these 210 and those who will come with shelter (Soddonta is one of the hottest places in Afar Region with current constant temperatures of over 50 degrees) and household utensils, ongoing food and water support. With the added political dimension of poor border security, the woreda government would like to assist those in life-threatening need inland from Soddonta at Ugum, some 30 kilometers from the main Afdeera road. For this, APDA has assistance to help them construct a feeder-road and then 2 rain-water cisterns to store rain and transported water. This settlement will need further support.

Above described are those affected by the epi-centre of the volcano. Surrounding them in the districts of Eli Daar, Afdeera, Erebtu and Teeru, all part of the described drought-belt where

malnutrition is very much apparent and animal loss has been as recent as this current hot season, volcanic ash has poisoned water sources, traditional wells have collapsed due to earthquake movement and animals were immediately diseased. APDA has sent out animal treatment teams in Bidu and Eli Daar as well as a special health team in Eli Daar that treated over 400 people who collapsed from poisonous gases overnight in early July.

In the overall picture, APDA is currently treating a total of 1,660 people for severe acute malnutrition in 12 woredas of the region including those described above. This is the result of recurrent herd-loss that has brought an estimated 4,000 households in the affected districts close to absolute destitution having less than 10 goats and no transport animals. Unless these people are assisted to the point of recovery of their assets, their malnutrition remains chronic and killing outbreaks such as measles and acute watery diarrhea remain imminent.

Yet, as of the night of 14th, lightning storms appear to have heralded the start of the main rains (July to September): storms looked widespread and rain has begun in many areas. This does not take away the specter of hunger leading to starvation and the inhumanity of dependency. To face this awesome reality, APDA proposes the following in immediate, medium and long-term answers:

The most vulnerable are

Short-term

- Shelter, household utensils and secured food and water for displaced coming into Soddonta, Bidu
- Animal treatment, supplementary animal feed
- Nutrition support, disease surveillance and prevention
- Transported water for thirsty communities (conditional to the rainfall)

Medium-term

- Community/ APDA dam and cistern construction, road construction in Bidu, Erebti, Afdeera, Teeru, Eli Daar
- Animal vaccination

Long-term

- Goat-restocking/ alternative income promotion in Teeru, Bidu, Eli Daar, Erebti
- Animal drug-vendors assuring ongoing animal treatment access
- Pasture land rejuvenation using water shed management scheme

The overriding summary of this is that APDA is looking to immediately respond to current disaster at the same time, map out a future that is becoming freer from vulnerability. It is now abundantly clear the Afar herd is extremely small in comparison to 7 to 10 years ago. Assistance by and large has bandaged the sore without treating the reality. Pastoralists must once again stand with viable assets.

1.1 Current activities working to reduce vulnerability

APDA is in the process of completing rehabilitation/ new water source construction in 68 sites along the Awash River as well as Kori, Sifra and Adda'ar as mentioned in the previous update. Both institutional and model household latrines along with wide sanitation awareness were part of this action. Remarkable results include securing 10 woreda action plans for acute watery diarrhea (AWD) response that are now woven into the regional plan, the experience of

interacting with the farm-laborers to secure sanitation behavior, well-trained and established community sanitation committees, a total of over 70,000 community given training awareness on AWD prevention.

1.2 Project being launched to reduce current food insecurity

APDA is now beginning to provide 2,500 food insecure households that have less than 10 goats with supplementary animal feed and parallel goat treatment for 3 months in Kori, Bidu and Eli Daar. The aim will be to keep the breeding goats alive and, having regained body condition, provide up to 2 liters of milk per goat assisting vulnerable women and children in household. Again, this project aims that the most thirsty – vulnerable communities construct 8 double – cylinder cisterns and around 110 kilometers of feeder roads receiving daily cash-for-work as household food support.

A special project aiming at disaster risk reduction through training and practical application in Eli Daar is beginning for 12 months as a pilot whereby APDA, the beneficiary community and the woreda government devise the means to tolerate inevitable drought conditions through improved environment protection, water source management and community resource management.

2. Development news: small strides for a productive future

2.1 Afar Language Development

We are all grieved by the sudden and untimely death of Samara University's professor, Issa Ibrahim who was one of the great inspirations for forwarding English and Afar learning for Afar students. In his memory, the project to mobilize the usage of Afar through urban teaching is going ahead as well as summer English teaching for university and high school students.

Too, APDA, the Samara University students' union and the Afar Language Research and Development Center are planning a week-long recognition of Afar as the Mother-tongue language to be held in October. Any readers who may want to contribute ideas to this are more than welcome.

2.2 Annual teacher-training

One hundred and seventy of the organization's 210 community teachers have just completed two months refresher training. Most of these teachers are basing activity on teaching Afar literacy as a development strategy supporting stopping harmful traditional practices, enabling women income generation and gaining community/ household behavior change toward safe motherhood. During this training course, the teachers were introduced to APDA's new functional literacy manual that allows the teacher to base the literacy lesson on an appropriate development message. The manual has messages from all of APDA's 7 program sectors (Afar education, primary health, female empowerment and stopping harmful practices, community income development, HIV response through youth and community leadership, relief and environment protection, monitoring and evaluation). Each message is designed to teach literacy and numeracy from the subject as well as giving the students practical development information on which they can base a community plan.

The second training course that will cater for non-formal education teachers begins now. The organization is very fortunate to have a visiting Afar teacher from Canada to assist in sharing pedagogy information in the training. For the first time in APDA's program, a total of 27

program sites will have 2 teachers per site (12 in Sifra, 6 in Awra, 5 in Kori and 4 in Dagaba) assisting with the huge challenge of multi-teaching demanded from one teacher per site.

Again, APDA is beginning to offer hostel accommodation in towns such as Dubte, Logya and the administration town of Awra for students from very remote communities who have completed Level 3 that they continue on in government schools from grade 5 onwards.

2.3 Youth mobilization

June/ July proved to be very exciting months for many pastoralist youth: Yallo and Goolina formed strong youth groups based on the Sifra/ 'Adda'ar pattern whereby the youth nominate group regulation to prevent them from involving in risky town behaviors; focusing on cultural mobilization and exemplary practice to attract other youth. Trainers included youth from the previous Sifra, Adda'ar and Assaita trained groups. They commented on the absolute transformation of these newly – formed groups after a 10 – day training from being negative and aimless to being focused and totally energized to tackle the perceived problems they face. These groups are quickly gaining regional and Federal recognition for their traditional dancing skills and their organizational example.

APDA now prepares for its second Regional Youth Conference planned to be held 2 days after the Eid of Ramadan.

2.4 New frontiers in stopping FGM/ C

Women extension workers trained almost 9 months ago from the communities of Goolina and Teeru are now showing confidence and strong commitment in daily working raise awareness on stopping harmful practices in their respective communities. They have been supported by the program harmful practices awareness team that has trained the community clan and religious leaders in how Islam opposes these practices and shown APDA's locally – made films to the communities that they decide to stop female genital mutilation, marriage by force and the like. While the community may hear on the radio these practices are harmful and also criminal, the community needs the opportunity of dialogue to come to terms with stopping them since they are indeed ancient practices that have been described as part of Afar identity.

2.5 Education Bureau's enthusiasm to redirect pastoralist education

Having discussed with some 26 NGOs in a meeting in Awash, the Bureau of Education described how they want to urgently improve access for Afar children to basic and intermediary education. They are looking for a very concerted effort from NGOs and nominated APDA to be the NGO chair in terms of leading NGOs to direct their resources into Afar education.

2.6 Mille hospital – an inch to go and we are there!!!

With all drainage down for grey water system – the first of its type in Ethiopia!!! And waste disposal getting knocked into shape, the hospital is ready to run in a month or so. Medical instruments and generator should arrive and be installed within a week. There is a plan for an opening involving many in-country and overseas friends who have been part of this miracle on September 24th. APDA would love to hear from all those interested to participate.

Linked to this emergency maternity hospital, APDA is looking forward to more comprehensive and innovative ways of improving the safety of Afar mothers delivering in their homes. Each quarter traditional birth attendant reports remind us that while the maternal death rate is lowered, it is not halted. Of the 1,056 births APDA – trained TBAs delivered from April to June, 9 mothers died and 21 newborns and 7 intra-uterine deaths were reported.

2.7 Opportunities for IGA and cooperative activities

The pastoralist community is strongly victim to the inflated market prices, especially in inland markets away from the administration. The government is now assisting by offering local cooperatives basic food commodities at set, low prices that they are expected to sell to the community. Through the organization cooperatives, relief is reaching some of the communities by this means. Animal prices are currently high and butter on high demand. A collective is now purchasing goats for the wider market.

Women's IGA groups are developing good saving practices and also becoming very innovative: growing fruit trees by the Awash River, fattening goats, selling traditional mats and undertaking petty trade. When they have no market opportunity, they involve in daily labor work to improve the saving.

The 9 saving and credit groups have given loans to their member and these members are now paying back and developing further finance plans. The habit of paying back is now well-established – they see the real benefit of letting the finance circulate.