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Kenya's rain, climate change and human disaster

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In the Dadaab refugee camp, on the Kenya-Somali border, 60-year-old grandmother Hamido Bare huddles in a makeshift hut of sticks and bits of cloth. It is one of hundreds like it, clustered haphazardly amidst puddles and mud. Dark storm clouds brew above. In her arms is her 15-day-old granddaughter, Haredo. The child is thin and too hungry to cry.

"I have only had sugar-water to feed her," Hamido Bare says.

Breast milk is not an option. Haredo's mother is dead. She was pregnant when their mud-brick house collapsed on her as waves of water swept through the Dadaab refugee camp. Pulled from the wreckage of their home, Haredo's mother survived long enough to give birth to her daughter, and then died five days later from her wounds, out in the open, under torrential rains.

Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia are now experiencing their heaviest and most devastating rains in 50 years.

There is certain grim irony to the fact that these rains hit while a major UN Climate Change conference was going on in Nairobi. The flooding follows on the region's worst drought in generations. Leading climatologists largely concur in blaming global warming for this. But despite this perfect piece of evidence on their doorstep, the UN conference could only agree to continue talking into the future about ways to stem the problem.

I am driving through Dadaab, along roads that are more ponds than pavement, with a team from the aid agency CARE. Aylmer, Que., native Mohammed Qazilbash, who runs CARE's Emergency and Refugee operations here, describes the scene when the flooding began in November.

"Not just rivers of water swept through," he tells me, "but the entire landscape became a wall of water, washing over everything."

Everything included huge sections of the refugee camps, destroying homes with water fouled by backed-up latrines.

Thousands of refugees have been forced to flee to higher ground. Emergency airlifts by the UN brought in desperately needed food. Food supplies in the camp had been destroyed by rising waters and trucks were stranded on washed-out roads.

Forced from homes

In all, the flooding has forced almost two million people from their homes in the region. Half that number is in Somalia, a poverty stricken and war-torn nation that can ill afford such a disaster. Factional fighting and the waters are making it almost impossible to get help to the million-plus people in need on the ground, so the UN is resorting to airdrops of food.

Standing on a section of highway where dozens of metres of pavement have been swept away by water, Mahdi Muhamed, head of disaster preparedness for the Red Cross for the coastal region of Kenya, looks around then puts the situation in simple terms.

"The roads are all washed away," he says. "The bridges are cut off, communication infrastructure is in dire need of repair."

For Kenya alone, the economic cost is expected to be in the billions of dollars.

We discover the realities first hand as we try to drive from Dadaab to Garissa, the nearest large town in this frontier region, about 120 kilometres away. I am keen to get to Garissa, as Kenyan television news video from the town has shown its main street as a raging river.

People form human chains, holding hands just to cross it. Despite driving in a four-wheel-drive Land Cruiser, we

can progress no further than 20 kilometres. In places the road is simply a lake, window deep, and so wide we can't find a way around it.

The death toll from over two weeks of flooding is in the hundreds, but UN and aid agencies expect that to rise. Cases of chronic diarrhea, caused by ingesting the unclean water, are already taking their toll on children. The therapeutic feeding centre in the Dadaab refugee camp is more than full. Outside, under the shade of a sprawling Acacia tree, there are 30 children being treated on an out-patient basis, 20 more — most stick thin — are being fed by tubes in the barrack-like hospital ward.

"The numbers we are treating have already doubled," head nurse Habiba Mohammed tells me amidst a crowd of sick, screaming children. "And now, with people living amidst this dirty water, we expect cholera to come. We pray to God it doesn't," she adds, "but we expect that it will."

Hamida Bare, holding her granddaughter to her chest, just shakes her head as I ask when she has seen rains like this.

"We have seen bad rains before," she says, "but nothing like this."

The aid workers I am with from CARE insist they will make sure baby Haredo gets some help.

Haredo's name comes from the Somali word for rain water, usually a blessing in these arid borderlands between Kenya and Somalia, but this year it has meant only disaster.

