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Effects of Somalia's drought still being felt even after heavy rains

The Associated Press

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WAJID, Somalia: When Hediga Mohamed showed up at a clinic here 15 days ago with her starving, 4-month-old baby in her arms, she made sure to tie a string of tiny wooden beads around the girl's neck for good luck.

"It's working. She's getting better," Mohamed said Thursday at the clinic where she has been staying while baby Rukia is being fed fortified milk and cereals.

In this impoverished and violent African country, thousands of people — particularly children under 5 — are still suffering from severe malnourishment linked to last year's scorching drought despite heavy rains that have inundated East Africa in recent months.

"The effects of a devastating drought are not wiped out by a rainy season," said Penny Ferguson, a spokeswoman for the U.N. World Food Program. "Once your cattle and your goats are dead, even when it rains they don't come back."

Somalia has some of the world's worst health indicators. Life expectancy at birth is 46 years; a quarter of children die before they reach 5. In many areas of Somalia, malnutrition rates are 20 percent or above, and the drought exacerbated that number, Ferguson said.

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sorghum anyway. Her youngest of four children, 2-year-old Habiba, has suffered the most from the lack of food, Somo said.

"If I did not come here my child would die," Somo said as her daughter was examined by a nurse for Action Against Hunger, also known by its French name Action Contre la Faim, which operates the clinic. The nurse placed a whimpering Habiba in a small sling to be weighed on a hanging scale.

At 6.3 kilograms (14 pounds), she was half the normal weight for a 2-year-old. Her ribs were protruding and her eyes sunken. Any tinier, she would have been too fragile to hang in the sling. A nurse would have had to put her in a red bucket to hang on the scale.

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"I would look at Habiba and see that her sickness is getting worse, so I couldn't be happy, I couldn't sleep," Somo said, her head wrapped in a black scarf.

Somo's three other children, ages 5, 8 and 10, are able to eat the sorghum her family gets from aid agencies and so are not starving. Habiba couldn't keep it down.

Vanessa Cagnion, the nurse in charge of the general nutrition program at the clinic, said there are 24 inpatients, most of them children under 5. Since the facility opened in March, the group has treated more than 600 people there and during weekly trips outside the town.

"When they come here their metabolism is upside down, they are very irritable, very weak, of course. The first week is always a bit sensitive," Cagnion said. Fewer than 10 children undergoing treatment at the clinic have died since March, she said.

Mohamed, whose baby Rukia wears the wooden beads, said Rukia's twin sister died several weeks ago but Rukia was gaining weight at the clinic.

Sitting on a green mat covered by a mosquito net, Mohamed said her daughter has already put on 1.5 kilograms (3 pounds) to reach nearly 3 kilograms (6.6 pounds).

The baby's target weight: 3.5 kilograms (7.7 pounds).

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