

STRICTLY EMBARGOED
Until 12.00 hrs.
Thursday 29th September

**WEATHER
ALERT!**

Evidence of a Hidden Crisis
for the World's Poor



[1984]³

COUNTRIES CURRENTLY AFFECTED BY DROUGHT

AFRICA

Angola

Benin

Cameroon

Cape Verde

Central African Republic

Chad

Ethiopia

Ghana

Lesotho

Madagascar

Mali

Mauritania

Mozambique

Rwanda

Senegal

South Africa

Swaziland

Tanzania

Togo

Zambia

Zimbabwe

ASIA

Fiji

India

Indonesia

Kampuchea

Nepal

Pakistan

Philippines

Sri Lanka

LATIN AMERICA

Bolivia

Brazil

Haiti

Nicaragua

Panama

Peru

COUNTRIES CURRENTLY AFFECTED BY FLOODS

ASIA

Bangladesh

China

India

LATIN AMERICA

Argentina

Bolivia

Cuba

Ecuador

Paraguay

Peru

OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

Indonesia - Volcanic eruption

Vietnam - Typhoon

INTRODUCTION

Millions of the world's poorest people are threatened by freak weather conditions. This year's unprecedented climatic extremes brought drought to the rich world hitting agriculture in Australia and South Africa particularly hard and substantially reducing the 1983 grain harvest in the USA. England experienced its hottest July on record. But in the poor world a chain of weather disasters has brought to crisis point many societies already struggling under serious economic and social problems and, in some cases, civil war.

More than 40 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America are currently suffering from the effects of flood or drought:

- * In Bolivia, reports the US Agency for International Development, over a quarter of the population - one and a half million people - are severely affected by drought. In Northern Peru 700,000 people have lost their livelihood or homes in the floods: one city which normally receives about an inch of rain a year has been inundated with 156 inches.
- * In the Indian state of Gujarat, writes an Oxfam Field Director, "unprecedented floods" have affected almost four million people with heavy loss of life, cattle, property and crops. The floods follow hard on the heels of a devastating cyclone and the worst drought for ten years.
- * Mozambique, according to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) has been hit by the "worst drought in many decades." This has exacerbated an already precarious agricultural system and four million people are facing serious food shortages.
- * South Africa normally exports 4.5 million tons of grain to its neighbours. This year in a dramatic reversal caused by drought South Africa will have to import 1.5 million tons of grain.

Oxfam, Britain's largest overseas charity, is confronted with more requests for emergency aid than at any time in its entire 40 year history. Other international agencies report a similar experience. Aid officials cannot recall a period when so many people were faced by disasters over such a large area of the globe.

This year's extraordinary level of demands for assistance is the result of the havoc caused by abnormal weather on Third World agriculture. These come on top of heavy commitments to help refugees and victims of previous disasters.

Last year saw severe drought in many parts of the world - in some cases it was the second or third year of rain failure - but the situation is far worse this year with devastating floods compounding the problems in many areas.

The sheer scale of the effects of the global weather extremes has yet to be widely recognised. Only the more dramatic aspects of specific weather disasters have attracted international attention; widespread hardship and suffering goes unnoticed. As a leading development journalist has put it: "We are not looking at a run-of-the-mill single disaster requiring disaster relief but at the collapse of development across a whole sweep of countries so economically depressed that they cannot possibly cope themselves."

In Oxfam's view, the crisis provoked by the weather highlights the need for a fundamental reappraisal of disaster relief work - recovery in many areas could take up to five years even to return people to previous subsistence levels. Guy Stringer, Oxfam's Deputy Director General, says, "It is no longer possible to think in terms of a few months' relief work: in many countries our whole development effort must now be linked to rebuilding people's lives after these extraordinary natural disasters which have made the grinding poverty of millions even more unbearable."

Oxfam is calling on international bodies and governments to place far greater emphasis on helping the victims of disaster. While much can be done by private agencies such as Oxfam, only a concerted international effort can respond adequately to the present emergency.

REQUESTS FOR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

For Oxfam the unusually high number of demands for emergency assistance is exhausting available funds. Over half Oxfam's special emergency budget for the current financial year was committed within the first three months of the year and a series of special appeals has had to be mounted to find extra funding.

Substantial grants towards drought and flood relief have already been made this year:

- * in South America £193,000 has been allocated for Peru and Bolivia (mainly to purchase potato and other seed)

- * in Ethiopia £231,000 has been spent (mostly on transporting food to drought victims)

- * in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat, £175,000 has been allocated for flood and drought relief (for emergency feeding and shelter and for job creation)

Oxfam emergency funds have also been called on to help the victims of civil strife, most recently in Sri Lanka where £65,000 went to assist people who lost their homes and possessions in the July disturbances. In addition support for large-scale refugee programmes in Africa, notably in Somalia, Southern Sudan and Rwanda, has absorbed almost £¼ million.

Nevertheless the demands for emergency funds this year are only just beginning. Oxfam's Overseas Director Michael Harris is certain that in many places the situation is bound to get worse towards the end of the year: "Droughts mean that no new crops are being planted - in places such as highland Bolivia, where the main diet is potatoes, virtually no seed exists at all as people have had to eat it out of desperation. This means that in countries where the harvest is usually gathered towards the end of the year, there won't be any and the needs will obviously increase very considerably as foodstocks become exhausted."

"Clearly, a much larger scale of international response is indicated - in Bolivia alone a consortium of local voluntary agencies is now appealing for more than £4.7 million for help in the stricken areas."

A WORLD-WIDE CLIMATE OF CHANGE

Drought and flood of course are not new phenomena; what is new and ominous is their extent, producing an unusually large coincidence of bad years in different parts of the world. Crops from Spain to Indonesia have been withered by drought and homes from Brazil to Polynesia have been wrecked by floods. Meteorological experts in Washington acknowledge that the extremes of the past year are "the most varied and far-reaching we can remember."

For many people in the Third World 'normal' weather tends to be unreliable and unhelpful. It generally consists of an irregular series of good and bad years. Even the good years are often not very good - and the bad years can exact a terrible toll.

The Sahel

One example is the Sahel region of Africa - that band of countries on the southern fringes of the Sahara Desert. In the early 70s a prolonged and severe Sahelian drought hit the headlines. But 10 years later the Sahel still suffers from poor and irregular rainfall.

Up to now there has been no question of any repeat of the 1973 scenes of mass starvation. Drought-inflicted hardship and suffering has to date been alleviated by government programmes and food aid, though these mechanisms are not infallible. For instance, there have been difficulties--getting food through to people who need it, especially in remote areas.

In parts of Chad, Mauritania and Senegal and the two northern-most departments of Upper Volta, the last harvests suffered from inadequate and erratic rains. The results are depressingly familiar; crop yields have been cut drastically and livestock are dying.

"Mauritania is in a particularly critical situation," reports the local Oxfam Field Director. "Last year the drought was considered almost as bad as in 1973 and this year looks like being worse since there has been even less rain. The full extent of the damage will not be known until the harvest in October but the outlook for agricultural production is grim." Some seeds were planted with the early meagre rains but died for lack of follow-up rain and the abnormally low level of the Senegal River has also reduced the agricultural land watered by river flooding.

Senegal too expects an extremely poor harvest this year for the second year running. There is no rain-fed agriculture this year in the north of the country and overall official estimates put this year's cereal production at 280,000 tons, a third of normal production. Thousands of cattle are also reported lost.

India

In India, the second most populous country in the world, one part or another suffers from drought or floods or both every year. But as the Field Director of Oxfam's East India programme reports, "This year disasters have dominated all activities, receiving nearly half our expenditure."

By March this year sporadic reports of deaths from starvation were coming in from the villages of Central and Southern Bihar where rains have been poor for the last two years. After representations from villagers the relief measures set in hand by the State Government and private agencies mitigated some of the worst effects of the drought. Oxfam for example spent £140,000 on job creation programmes. In the end however many people survived because of a fortunate quirk of nature - a bumper harvest of wild fruit from the forest.

A total of nine states in India have faced drought this year. Tamil Nadu has undergone its third successive year of drought. "What is the point of sowing if the rain gods do not have mercy on us?" asked one farmer. Irrigation water is stored in special tanks but by last December about 7,000 tanks in Ramnad district were either dry or contained very little water. In January almost all the tanks in Pudukottai district were reported dry. The shortfall in rice production for the state as a whole was expected to be about 35-40%. Inevitably the price of rice has risen steeply.

The poor have to bear the brunt of the burden. Many depend on seasonal agricultural labour but with the drought jobs have been few and widespread unemployment is a major problem. In one area people have already begun to sell their cattle and mortgage their belongings and even land to get money for food. As in drought areas elsewhere, the price of cattle has dropped, often to half the usual price. 'In spite of the importance of cattle to their life and the meagre price they are fetching,' says one Oxfam field report, 'one can see never-ending trains of cattle being marched to the market for selling.'

Similar comments come from Oxfam reports written in August on other states affected. In one hard-hit area of Rajasthan, 'the grain stores were quite empty in all the houses visited.' In the Burdwan district of West Bengal, 'the agricultural operations are in a depressing state as the rains are late and grossly inadequate. If good rains don't follow in the coming days, any possibility of employment in agriculture will diminish. This, coupled with virtually no crop last year because of drought, will render many families destitute. The picture is one of distress and gloom.'

It is too early to assess whether this year's autumn monsoon storms can break the pattern of drought or aggravate the problems of the poor as happened recently in Gujarat. Last year Gujarat faced its worst drought since 1972-73. A cyclone and accompanying rains in November improved prospects for the winter harvest but at a cost of 540 dead and 2,000 villages devastated. Worse was to follow. In June this year 50 inches of rain fell in 36 hours - roughly the amount that usually falls in a two year period. Over 600 people died and thousands of families were made homeless. Almost four million people were affected. Pramod Unia, Oxfam's Field Director for the region, reports that, "The drought, the cyclone and the floods occurring in quick succession have each taken their toll: the agricultural economy of Saurashtra region, regarded as the grain bowl of Gujarat has been laid waste. It will take a long time to recover. Another effect will be to accelerate the process of marginalisation of the poor peasants forcing them to sell their land and join the ranks of the landless."

Other areas of Asia have been hit by floods, including parts of China and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh unprecedented rains lasting four days in the first week of August inundated crops and homes, affecting over a million people. As a result of drought and irregular rainfall in Kampuchea output of rice and other crops will be below even the bad 1981 year, reports the FAO. Food prices have already risen by up to 100%. In some provinces wells have dried up and people have to travel 12 miles for water. Additional food aid is necessary, says the FAO, "in order to reduce the risk of famine and safeguard human life."

Southern Africa

In Southern Africa many areas are now undergoing their second or third consecutive year of drought. The worst affected countries are Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

Botswana's coarsegrain harvest of 1983 is reported to be extremely poor: production is estimated at only 16,000 tons against 60,000 in a normal year. Livestock are now in poor condition and little improvement is foreseen until the next rainy season - if it comes - in November.

Lesotho's second year of drought has also reduced cereal crops to a quarter of normal while the FAO speaks of "the almost complete failure" of the main season crop in the centre and south of Mozambique. Losses are estimated at 300,000 tons of grains, 80,000 tons of beans and groundnuts and a million tons of cassava. Swaziland too has seen its maize harvest cut to half its normal tonnage and this comes on top of last year's reduced crop. Severe water shortage for drinking is also reported there and rationing is in effect.

In 1980 Zimbabwe had a record maize harvest of 2.8 million tons. It began to export to other countries in the region and some of its stocks were even bought by the World Food Programme to be used as food aid in deficit parts of Africa. This year's crop has been sharply reduced by drought and may only yield a million tons.

It is in South Africa however that the catastrophic drop in production could have the most severe consequences for the continent. In a normal year South Africa's maize harvest reaches about 10 million tons and huge quantities - 4.5 million tons in 1982/83 - are exported to other parts of Africa. This year maize production will be below domestic requirements and 1.5 million tons will have to be imported.

The "homelands" or Bantustans, where Government policy has forced millions to settle on unproductive and eroded land are among the worst affected areas. Families in the "homelands" have been already hit badly by the South African recession with less money being sent back by migrant workers. Increasingly harsh enforcement of influx control laws has thrown yet more people into these arid lands. The current drought has further impoverished the Bantustan population. According to a church group in Kwazulu: "More than 50% of those who owned cattle or goats in 1980 no longer own any animals at all. Since the drought started these local stock-owners have lost approximately 75% of their cattle, 60% of their goats and 95% of their sheep."

South America

One of the most abnormal weather factors this year has been the effect of a little understood current in the Pacific. This mysterious warm current is called El Niño de Navidad, the Christ-Child, since its occasional appearances begin off Peru around Christmas. It wells up at full force about every seven to ten years. In 1972, its last major appearance before this one, it destroyed Peru's fishing industry. Last year's El Niño, however, was the most severe on record. It raised the sea level off Peru by about seven inches and the temperature by seven degrees centigrade: other Niños only raised it by one to three degrees. The exceptionally warm waters heated the lower atmosphere and formed a vapour which condensed and unleashed violent storms that created havoc along the Pacific coast from California (during the Queen's visit in February) to Chile. Floods in France and Germany earlier this year are also thought to have been caused by El Niño.

Interacting with the current is a huge wind circulation system covering the tropical Pacific, called the Walker circulation, after Sir Gilbert Walker, the British scientist. It is this circulation, experts believe, that creates weather extremes, the drought zone and the floods. The net effect of both phenomena since 1982 has been devastating over many parts of the world.

The result for South America has been a series of disasters with serious economic and social consequences, above all for the poor. The rural economy in the highlands of Peru and Bolivia, for example, revolves around growing potatoes and keeping animals. Potatoes provide the staple food for the year while animals constitute people's savings - a kind of inflation-proofed walking bank account. From December last year the rains failed. The potato harvest in April duly failed as well, at best yielding only a fifth of normal production. Some families got virtually none at all, and already many are running out of last year's reserves. Consequently food has to be bought at a time when prices are rising steeply.

Between February and April this year the price of chuño, a common type of dried potato, leapt by almost 50% in one of the main cities in the Peruvian highlands. To raise cash, animals have to be sold, but with more on the market, and in often poor condition, prices are plummeting.

The poor thus lose out twice. They are deprived of their foodstocks and are being forced to sell their animals at a discount. Equally as bad is the loss of potato seed for the next harvest: either none was saved or it will soon be eaten. The seed deficit for the Peruvian department of Puno alone is estimated at 36,000 tons. Even with good rains, next year's harvest will be much reduced.

The traditional way of dealing with disaster, migration, does not afford much hope as people crowd into cities where work in an age of recession is scarce and conditions at the best of times are grim. A World Bank official in Bolivia described the scene in Potosi city, where thousands of rural peasant families are going, as the worst he had ever seen. Official figures give the number of people badly affected in Peru and Bolivia at over two million.

El Niño has caused floods as well as drought. In the desert area of Northern Peru extraordinary amounts of water have caused widespread damage to crops, roads, bridges, irrigation channels and houses. One city received 156 inches of rain in the eight months up to June this year: no rain at all fell in the corresponding 1981/82 period. In the departments of Tumbes and Piura 12,500 houses have been destroyed and another 28,000 damaged: they were made of adobe and washed away like sandcastles.

The flooding brought serious health problems in its wake. An Oxfam field officer reported on her visit to the town of Piura; "Many people were suffering from sores on their legs, fevers, 'flu and gastroenteritis. El Niño brought not only heavy rainstorms, but also extreme heat by day. The combination of the heat and the flooding has made the number of dehydration cases among children shoot up, and many are dying. It's a vicious circle: the rains and the heat won't let up, families have lost their homes, possessions, and in many cases their jobs, and so can't afford food, let alone medicines.

A young woman came up to us in the street with her small child in her arms, and asked us for money to buy medicines for her son, who had a 'fever.' Though obviously embarrassed at asking for money, she had no alternative since her husband's small tailor's shop had collapsed and they were trying to set up elsewhere."

Most roads have been severely affected as fast running waters swept away even tarmac surfaces and damaged or destroyed 50 major bridges. Scores of health-posts and hundreds of schoolrooms suffered similar treatment. Five ports were damaged, as were hundreds of miles of irrigation channels. Twenty percent of the Peruvian rice crop, 155,000 tons in all has been ruined plus large amounts of sugar, cotton, bananas and corn. Total damage was calculated by the US Agency for International Development at over £650 million. Flood damage in Bolivia and Ecuador was less in cash terms but in the three countries almost one and a half million people continue to be severely affected. Ironically while the human disaster continues, a vast area of the desert in Northern Peru is in full bloom, with green shrubs everywhere.

WEATHER AND POVERTY

The weather is not to blame for everything. The poor live on the worst land, most liable to drought or floods, and least capable of generating a surplus in a good year to tide them through a bad one. They often have no reserves - so in bad years they have to sell their land or their cattle.

Oxfam's field officer identified the Gujarat flood victims in his report as follows:

"I visited places like:

- * Shahpur where 60 people have died and approximately 175 houses have collapsed. These belonged mostly to landless 'Harijans' (untouchables) who live in the low-lying areas close to the river.
- * Ventali where 200 people lost their lives as hundreds of migrant fruit-pickers were trapped in mango orchards and engulfed by the flood water.
- * Mehwas where 60 out of 80 houses have been destroyed. All belonged to poor landless labourers ..."

Poor people are vulnerable to a combination of adverse factors. In Africa there is an outbreak of rinderpest, a lethal disease that attacks animals. It has been killing cattle in at least eight countries, stretching from Benin in West Africa to Tanzania in the East. Foot and mouth disease has broken out further south in Mozambique and Zambia. Wars and civil strife have also contributed to this year's toll of lives and livelihoods but abnormal weather conditions have added an extra and terrible burden on the poor. They are like the people in the Chinese story who are up to their necks in water - even a ripple will drown them.

APPEALS FOR ACTION

1. Emergency Appeal

Because of the severity of the global weather crisis Oxfam has launched an urgent nationwide Appeal to fund its over-stretched emergency programme. But equally important is our call on the international community to take immediate action to improve disaster response.

2. Food Aid

At present only about 10% of all food aid is used for emergencies. Thus when food aid is required urgently for drought relief it is not readily available. For example the FAO had to mount an international appeal in June this year for 600,000 tons of emergency food aid for Africa alone. This demonstrates a pressing need for the radical revision of food aid priorities.

3. Preventive Measures

There is an equally pressing need to recognise that much more can and should be done, particularly in combatting drought, by way of disaster preventive measures. At the community level, impressive results have been achieved by groups of villagers themselves, tackling for example sand-dune stabilization in Somalia or soil erosion in Upper Volta. Although central authorities are becoming more aware of environmental factors, specific governmental programmes - where they exist - have not as yet had much impact.

Governments and major international agencies should pay much more heed to village mobilization successes and encourage the expansion of this grassroots approach on a national scale. This would greatly mitigate drought and increase food production.

4. Reappraisal of Disaster Responses

Disasters in poor countries are still widely perceived as dramatic incidents which merely necessitate short-term measures. But it is chronic poverty that makes over half the world's people peculiarly vulnerable to the vagaries of climate. Recovery from this year's damage will take up to five years and even so a more profound response is needed. The disastrous weather of 1983 must be followed by a renewed international commitment to Development.

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