

Christian agencies continue work in Somalia despite security issues

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Nairobi, Kenya, July 21 (ENInews)--Christian relief agencies providing aid to millions of people facing drought in Somalia face security issues in the war-torn country, where humanitarian officials say operating is difficult, but not impossible.

Nearly 3.7 million people, half of the country's population, are affected by a serious food crisis, according to the United Nations, which declared famine in two regions of southern Somalia. An estimated 2.8 million people have been affected by the crisis.

"We should scale up, and we can," said Catholic bishop Giorgio Bertin of Djibouti, who is the apostolic administrator of Mogadishu and president of the Catholic relief agency Caritas Somalia, which is providing aid to drought-affected people in Lower Juba.

"Of course, in the face of the need, this is a very little, but it is better to do something rather than nothing," said Bertin, who on 19 July received a 50,000 euro donation from Pope Benedict XVI.

Christian agencies report that an estimated 1,500 refugees fleeing the famine were arriving daily in Dadaab camp in northern Kenya. Another 1,700 are arriving in eastern Ethiopia.

"Getting assistance to the people in southern Somalia during this month is critical to their long-term future and will also be an important step in alleviating the regional crisis," said Mark Bowden, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for Somalia, at a news conference in Nairobi on 20 July.

He said agencies must prepare for the long term, because it was unlikely there will be a respite to the drought before December or January.

Berhane Woldemichael of Norwegian Church Aid, which has operated in the Gedo region for the past 20 years, said relief agencies were faced with a situation completely different from the usual conflict in the region.

"This is an extremely challenging situation and it is something we hope the international community will respond positively to," said Woldemichael whose organization works closely with Diakonie, the social service agency of the German Protestant Church, in the ACT Alliance Somali Forum.

Diakonie is partnering with national organizations to provide food, water and other items to internally displaced persons affected by conflict and drought in Banadir, and the middle and lower Shabelle regions of Southern Somalia, according to Rachael Were, program officer in Nairobi.

Humanitarian agencies working in Somalia had warned of the famine, according to Woldemichael. "We knew this was going to come because there is a limit to how much suffering people can sustain. The people have lived in a situation of conflict for more than 20 years. They have totally lost their coping mechanisms, and what we are seeing is a cumulative effect of all the neglect," he said.

The organization's link to Christianity had not caused any problems in the mainly Islamic country because the people judged it by its work.

"The communities have been guarantors for our presence there. So it is really possible to work in Somalia," said Woldemichael.