

Kenya promises to expand refugee camp

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The Kenyan government has promised to expand a refugee camp for thousands of desperate Somalis fleeing a drought crisis in the Horn of Africa, and faith groups and humanitarian agencies are praising the move.

The Lutheran World Federation "welcomes the decision as a vital life-saving measure, especially in view of the current high influx of Somali refugees fleeing drought and insecurity at home," LWF general secretary Martin Junge said in a July 18 letter to Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga.

The LWF, which manages the camp for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, is working with other agencies to provide food and water for the refugees, many of whom are starving children. The UN describes it as the world's most dire humanitarian emergency.

The camp, called Ifo II, is an extension of the Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya, which now holds nearly 500,000 Somalis and has become the world's largest refugee camp. Ifo II has been standing empty, complete with new water tanks, lavatories and health-care facilities.

After touring Dadaab on July 14, Odinga announced that the government would allow settlement within ten days as a humanitarian gesture. The region's drought is viewed as the worst in the last 60 years. An estimated 10 million people in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia face starvation and malnutrition.

"Since the camp is already there, I think the decision to open it is a good one. I welcome it," said Catholic bishop Giorgio Bertin of Djibouti, the apostolic administrator of Mogadishu. "It will not solve the problem in southern Somalia, but surely human lives will be saved," added Bertin, who is also the president of Caritas Somalia, a Catholic aid agency.

António Guterres, who heads the UN's refugee agency, in a statement from his Geneva office applauded the opening and promised his organization's full support to the government. He said the expansion effort will ease overcrowding at the camp.

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