

U.N. Officials Draw Attention to Starvation in Ethiopia

By REUTERS

ROME, June 16 (Reuters) — The world is not watching, but more than 12 million Ethiopians risk starving to death if there is no extensive mobilization of aid to prevent a famine, a senior United States official said today.

The official, Tony Hall, the American ambassador to the United Nations food agencies, said many people were referring to the situation in Ethiopia by using the word famine but did not want to do so publicly.

"The situation in Ethiopia has been underreported — Iraq and Afghanistan have taken up a lot of the news," added Mr. Hall, who last visited Ethiopia three months ago.

"People are starving to death, and young children don't have a good chance of survival because their mothers lack milk, and there is not enough clean water and food," he said.

He agreed with United Nations estimates that some 12.6 million Ethiopians, struggling with drought and a lack of clean water, risked starving to death, and he said the crisis was worst in the south of the country.

He also criticized some United Nations agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization, based in Rome, for lacking a sense of urgency about Ethiopia.

Mr. Hall said an appeal by the organization for seed for farmers had understated their needs and would not have anywhere near enough impact to tackle widespread hunger.

The F.A.O. is giving Ethiopian farmers seed, fertilizer and tools, and says it is battling a shortage of funds to reach millions of hungry people.

Richard China, an official with the F.A.O.'s emergency division, said the organization was working as quickly as possible to aid Ethiopian farmers, and had distributed one million tons of seed to farmers since February.

He said the F.A.O.'s work would bring food to some 1.8 million Ethiopians.

Nongovernmental organizations were also working to distribute seed to farmers, he added.

"An important consideration is that if we overestimate the situation and the country is flooded with food aid, this can have a depressing effect on markets, and people can be over-dependent on food aid," Mr. China said.

Mr. Hall said Ethiopia needed a huge injection of food, seed, clean water, medicines and education about H.I.V. and AIDS to prevent a spiraling crisis.

"We need to step up to the plate on this," the ambassador said. "We need more donors and development projects."

The United States is the world's leading donor to Ethiopia. The country has provided 41 percent of Ethiopia's emergency food needs for 2003 and 45 percent of neighboring Eritrea's needs, as well as an additional \$32.7 million in relief funds for emergency health and nutrition, water and sanitation and farming.

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