

EXCLUSIVE

BY TOM PARRY in Garowe, Somalia

IT is the stick-thin wrists which mark out severely malnourished children such as Hamdi Ahmed in drought-stricken Somalia.

At a clinic where dozens of desperately ill babies are being brought in for emergency treatment, the skeletal girl lies listlessly in her mum Ayaan's arms. Six months old but weighing less than 8lb, the average for a newborn in Britain, she shifts her head slowly towards me.

Only then do I see it is covered in white blotches, her mouth is red with a sore rash, and her eyes are painfully sealed over.

Hamdi is so hungry her body's defence system has failed, leaving her prone to infection. She looks ready to die.

After three years without rain, the longest dry spell since records began here in 1950, Somalia is on the cusp of a devastating famine.

Death stalks the parched plains of the blighted Horn of Africa, picking off children one by one. "She is so malnourished her immunity has gone," says Dr Said Hamed. "Many children die of other complications as well as hunger."

"She has been in so much pain for three months she cannot eat. Her mother cannot breastfeed as she is not eating enough."

Hamdi is just one of more than 20 million people afflicted by an unprecedented food crisis across four countries: Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria and Yemen.

In Somalia, a nation ruined by civil war and terrorist group al-Shabaab, the drought has wiped out 60% of the livestock on which most depend. Around 6.2 million people, more than half the population, are in dire need of assistance.

Latest surveys show 363,000 vulnerable children suffering from malnutrition, including 71,000 severe cases like Hamdi.

Without cattle and goats to trade for other foods such as rice and flour, families such as hers living in the rocky red-sand desert have nothing. So drastic are conditions that when a brief shower fell over one coastal region in December last year, 30,000 nomads marched off in the hope of saving their vital herds.

WEAK

They left their wives and children to fend for themselves in makeshift camps. Fadumo was lucky enough to make it to this clinic in Garowe, the only one for 200 miles in any direction.

Alongside Hamdi in the ward is 18-month-old Ahmed, who was brought here unconscious four days before by his mother Asha Salah, 25.

At six kilos, just under one stone and less than half normal body weight, he is being fed through an intravenous drip on his wrist. He had severe anaemia and hypoglycaemia when he arrived.

Asha tells me: "He was so weak he couldn't eat even if we had food to give him. He has been getting more and more ill for two months."

"For now he seems to be getting slowly better, but we live in a camp three hours from here. There I don't know how we will get food as all of our goats have died. We used to have 400."

Upsetting scenes are the daily routine for the clinic doctors. The number of malnutrition admissions doubled from January to February.

Dr Hamed says the clinic does not have the capacity to feed and rehydrate the many children arriving now.

In an adjoining ward I see 18-month-old Amina Issa, who has kidney problems linked to her hunger. She is so weak that she fails to react when the doctor touches her hand.

Tubes come out of her nose and mouth to help her breathe and top up her critically low glucose levels. Mum Ayan tells me: "We did not bring her to the clinic because we could not afford the transport. The cost of food has gone up by 50% so we have no money left."

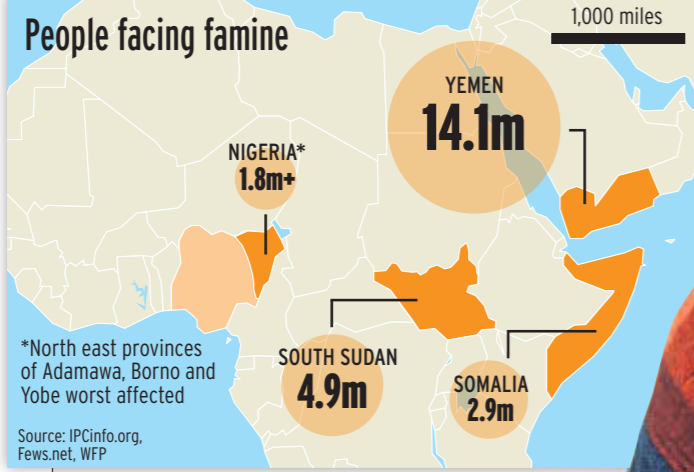
"She fell unconscious so I managed to get to the road and we came here in the back of a truck. I carried her here in my arms."

"Imagine what that was like for me, her mother, to see her suffering like that."

To compound the doctors' challenges, the mothers too are malnourished and therefore



LAST RESORT Children scour rubbish tip looking for food



ANGUISH Starving girl with feeding tube

cannot breastfeed babies. Meanwhile, many more are dying unseen without help while scouring the parched landscape in search of their next meal. In a rabbit warren of corrugated iron shacks on the edge of Garowe, I meet grieving dad Nour Jeas, 43, whose baby daughter Asluub has just died at less than three weeks old.

The cause was acute watery diarrhoea, brought on by having to give the tot contaminated water because of the drought.

He takes me to her freshly-dug grave, a mound of stones over a tiny hole in the sand. The patch of scrubland has been set aside for dead children. There are more than 100 graves, 28 made in the past month. Across the arid Puntland region, where Somali cargo ship pirates prospered until recently, the evidence of the drought is everywhere.

Carcasses of decomposing cows and goats litter the roadside, covered by clouds of flies. There is no vegetation

How you can help

SAVE The Children chief executive Kevin Watkins wants G7 countries including Britain to step up quickly.

One of the charity's biggest concerns is the surge in people dying from cholera and diarrhoea.

"Saving these lives and rebuilding

livelihoods will require concerted action by the international community - and that action needs to start now," he said.

"The response to the crisis facing Somalia's children is indefensible and unforgivable. The international

community ignored the early warning signs, failed to act decisively. They are now repeating all of the mistakes."

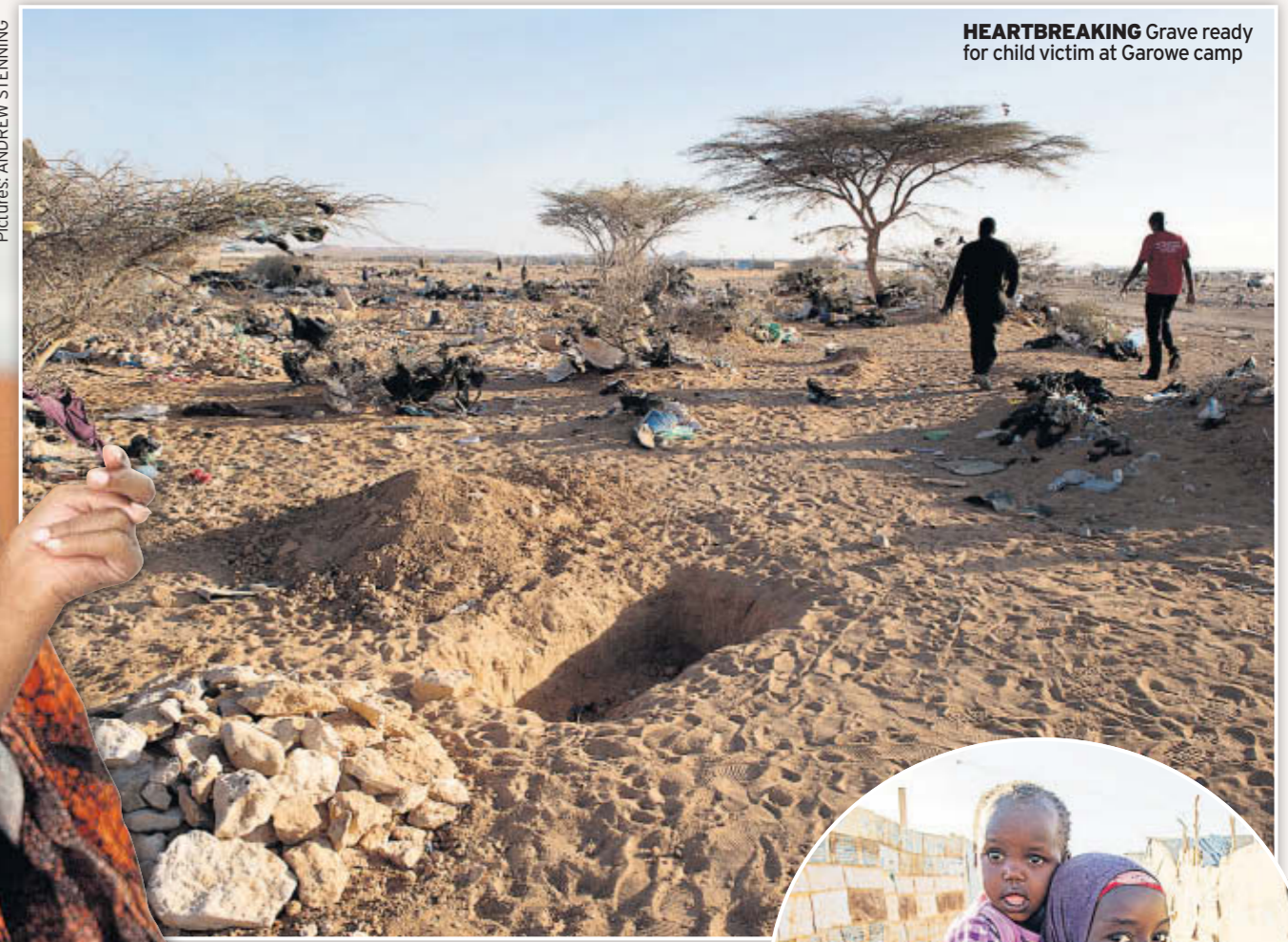
To donate to Save the Children's East Africa appeal, or for more information, go to <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/emergencies/east-africa-food-crisis-appeal>

Hamdi is so hungry that her body's defence system has failed.. she looks ready to die

» Somalia in grip of deadly famine » 6.2m desperately need our aid

NEAR DEATH Ayaan with pitiful little girl Hamdi

Pictures: ANDREW STENNING



HEARTBREAKING Grave ready for child victim at Garowe camp

8lb

How much Hamdi weighed when she arrived at clinic

60

Percentage of livestock wiped out by famine, leaving families starving

except for thorny acacia bushes. Nothing thrives in the relentless blistering heat. Our vehicle leaves a cloud of dust in its wake as we travel to remote Uskure camp.

The unforgiving landscape often appears like the surface of Mars. In one pitiful wicker-frame shelter covered by cattle-hide and torn tarpaulins are two dangerously malnourished children, nine-month-old Ahmed and his elder sister Farhigo, two.

Ahmed has the telltale signs - vomiting, diarrhoea and weakness. Farhigo, born severely disabled, lies on

the floor, unable to swat away the flies which flit around her feeble body. Mum Buho, 31, says: "I do not have the money to keep my children alive. I have had to borrow money from others to get food - and now they will not lend any more."

After another bumpy two-hour ride we reach an outreach malnutrition clinic run by aid agency Save The Children in Shadha.

A nurse is weighing three brothers, all under five. The youngest, Abdurahman, two, has bronchitis and pneumonia. The eldest, Abdulahi, five, has a high fever. The medic wraps a special tape measure around their wrists. A circumference reading on the green part of the tape would be healthy. None of them achieve this.

Abdulahi looks so brittle he could snap. Seeing them is a graphic illustration of how this latest looming disaster could be even worse than the 2011 Somalia famine which claimed 260,000 lives.

This time, seasonal rains which usually fall after April are predicted to be well below average. Last month Britain's special envoy for the Horn



HELP US Brother and sister of tragic tot Asluub

of Africa, Sir Nicholas Kay, warned hundreds of thousands could die within months.

Save The Children is already overstretched, so the UN is calling on wealthy nations to provide nearly £700million in emergency funds. Yet pledges so far are not even close.

After decades of upheaval, barren Somalia's latest catastrophe is waiting in the wings.

Now fighting a battle with nature, its first casualties are defenceless children like Hamdi.

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