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^Drought and high food prices leads to new starvation crisis in  
Ethiopia<

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^By ANITA POWELL=

^Associated Press Writer=

¶ SHANTO, Ethiopia (AP) \_ This year's poor rains have nearly killed **Bizunesh**.

¶ The rangy 3-year-old weighs less than 10 pounds (four kilograms). Her long limbs, weak and folded like a praying mantis, cannot carry even her slight weight. She cannot speak. She doesn't want to eat. Health officials say she is permanently stunted.

¶ **Bizunesh** \_ whose name, sadly, means "plentiful" \_ is one of untold numbers of children hit by this year's double blow of a countrywide drought and skyrocketing global food prices that has brought **famine**, once again, to Ethiopia.

¶ "She should be bigger than this," said her mother Zewdunesh Feltam, rocking the listless child. "Before there was maize, different kinds of food. But now there is nothing ... I beg for milk from my neighbors."

¶ The U.N. children's agency said in a statement Tuesday an estimated 126,000 Ethiopian children urgently need food and medical care because of severe malnutrition \_ and called the current crisis "the worst since the major humanitarian crisis of 2003."

¶ The U.N. World Food Program estimates that 2.7 million Ethiopians will need emergency food aid because of late rains \_ nearly double the number who needed help last year. An additional 5 million of Ethiopia's 80 million people receive aid each year because they never have enough food, whether harvests are good or not.

¶ In Shanto, the crisis is vivid. A feeding center run by the Irish charity GOAL has admitted 73 starving children in the past month.

¶ Some, like **Bizunesh**, are frail and skeletal. Others, like 4-year-old Eyob Tadesse, have grossly swollen limbs in a sign of extreme malnutrition.

¶ Eyob, whose mother said he used to be a lively, talkative child, sat in a stupor, unable to speak, not moving even to brush away the flies that swarmed all over his face. The sunny room humid with a recent, too late, rain shower was made gloomy by an eerie silence despite being full of sick children. Chronic

malnutrition can affect children for life, stunting their growth, brain development and immune systems, which leaves them vulnerable to a host of illnesses.

¶ Many mothers said their families were trying to survive on a gluey, chewy bread made of the root of the "false banana" plant — one of many wild or so-called **famine** foods that Ethiopians depend on in times of trouble.

¶ It's not known how many children have died or are starving now. Local and international aid and health workers say between 10 and nearly 20 percent of Ethiopia's children are malnourished — 15 percent is considered a critical situation. In 2006, Ethiopia had 13.4 million children under the age of five, according to UNICEF.

¶ In Shanto, a southwestern agricultural area that grows sweet potatoes, recent rains arrived too late to save the harvest.

¶ Samuel Akale, a nutritionist with the government's disaster prevention agency, said the hunger will get worse. "The number of severely malnourished will increase, and then they'll die."

¶ WFP officials say the drought has affected six of Ethiopia's nine regions, stretching from Tigray in the north to the vast and dry Somali region in the south, though not every part of every region is affected.

¶ Spokesman Greg Beals said the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs is preparing an appeal for additional tens of millions of dollars.

¶ "This is a real crisis that needs to be addressed," he said.

¶ Ethiopia is a country with a history of hunger. It escalated to notoriety in 1984 when a **famine** compounded by communist policies killed some 1 million people. Pictures of stick-thin children like **Bizunesh** were broadcast onto television sets around the world.

¶ This year's crisis is mild in comparison. But drought and chronic hunger persist in Ethiopia, a Horn of Africa nation known for its coffee, a major export. In 2003, droughts led 13.2 million people to seek emergency food aid. Drought in 2000 left more than 10 million needing emergency food.

¶ Drought is especially disastrous in Ethiopia because more than 80 percent of people live off the land, and agriculture drives the economy, accounting for half of all domestic production and 85 percent of exports.

¶ Farmers sell their produce at market prices to government stores and other people. And though the government owns all the land, farmers are given title deeds to the land they cultivate and they can use the title deeds as collateral for loans.

¶ Aid agencies say emergency intervention is not enough and are appealing for more money to support regular feeding programs.

¶ "What we're doing at the moment is waiting until children get severely malnourished, taking them into the feeding program, getting them back to a level of moderate malnutrition and then watching them cycle back," said Hatty Newhouse, a nutrition adviser from GOAL.

¶ There are fears that the next harvest also will fail.

¶ "We are crying with the mothers and the children," said Akale, the nutritionist.