

BIG DRY

hits Papua New Guinea hard

Changing weather patterns are hitting Pacific Islanders hard. Water New Zealand supports Oxfam in its work to improve water supply and sanitation in Papua New Guinea.

Across the Pacific, as many as 4.7 million people face hunger, poverty and disease due to El Niño related droughts, erratic rains and frosts.

Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Samoa and Tonga are experiencing worsening drought, while central Pacific countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu will likely see intense rain causing flooding, and higher sea levels. The last major El Niño in 1997-1998 caused severe drought and major crop losses in the Pacific. This year's El Niño is expected to be even more severe.

Papua New Guinea is currently the country worst hit by

El Niño in the Pacific. Rainfall has been below average for almost a year. This has led to drought conditions that together with frost in the highlands have destroyed crops and livestock. An estimated 2.4 million people may be affected, with a projected 1.9 million of these in the highlands.

Communities relying heavily on farming are suffering severe food shortages. Some communities say their food supplies will last two to three months; others say only a month.

With many rivers and creeks drying up, villagers are forced to use alternative water sources, compromising hygiene practices and causing diarrhoea, dysentery and typhoid. Women now



Paku Dick: "The dry season destroyed everything."



Oxfam is distributing jerry cans so families can store water.



Children are becoming malnourished because crops are failing..

have to walk even further to get water and schools are open only half the day in response to the heat and lack of water.

“We used to eat two to three times a day. But now because of the dry season, we are eating just once a day.”

Margaret Thomas is a mother of four children living in Danbagl, a village nestled in a valley overshadowed by Mt Wilhelm, Papua New Guinea’s highest mountain. She grows sweet potatoes to earn money and helps her family maintain their onion crop, which they started with the support of Oxfam several years ago. But now the family is once again struggling to put food on the table.

WHAT IS EL NIÑO?

A super-charged weather phenomenon, El Niño is the name given to a periodic heating of the eastern tropical Pacific, which alters weather patterns globally. This year could be the worst ever recorded, with record-high global temperatures, droughts and erratic rains devastating parts of Africa, the Pacific, Asia, the Caribbean and Central and South America.

“In the past, the other dry seasons were quite difficult, but not as difficult as now,” Margaret says. “Today’s dry season is worse because all the vegetables in the gardens – especially the sweet potatoes – are being destroyed by the insects. It’s not like before.”

Paku Dick, a woman farmer from nearby Kafetugu village, says her crops have been totally destroyed this season. “Now there is nothing left: the pests have eaten up all the seeds, the leaves are dried out by the sun, there is very little rain and there is nothing we can do,” she says. “The dry season destroyed everything.”

For many, mealtime now consists of a few small pieces of boiled vegetables or wild foods once a day.

“When my children are hungry they go to the bush and collect fruits to eat and it makes me sad they are hungry,” Margaret says. “Sometimes the fruits are not really ready to eat but then they’re hungry, so they have to eat it. Then later, they get worms in their tummy; they get sick.

“They are missing two to three days off school due to lack of food ... If they go to school without [eating], they will faint.”

In the nearby village of Tugumpaso, local Oxfam staff identified three cases of infant malnutrition. Smiley Jacob, the young mother of nine-month-old Grace, says the drought has destroyed her garden, leaving her with nothing to feed

her child. Grace is severely underweight, with her upper arm measuring just 11cm – about 5cm less than it should be for a child of her age.

Oxfam staff supervised Smiley and Grace’s visits to the local health centre and will continue to work with villages on improving nutrition. But Smiley feels there is little hope for her baby.

“When she was five months, I realised she began to lose weight,” she says. “I went to the local pastor to pray for her. It was all I could do. We have very little food.”

Oxfam has been working in Papua New Guinea since 1991 and has formed deep, enduring relationships with many of the communities since. In addition to our long-term development work, we have been assessing conditions in drought-affected areas, establishing the needs of communities, and working with other agencies on plans to help the most vulnerable prepare for what lies ahead.

Through its local partners, Oxfam is distributing jerry cans for water storage and water purification tablets and soap, which helps prevent the spread of diseases. We are also working in health centres to construct new rainwater catchments, connect centres to existing gravity fed systems and repair broken pipework.

Oxfam is also reaching out to around 4000 households (28,000 people) with agricultural advice on how to cope with the drought and training courses for drought adaptation have begun.

“Before Oxfam came, many people in the community were sick and they died,” says Margaret Kondango, also from Danbagl village. “But now [Oxfam] is here, because they provided toilets and water and how to be hygienic, less people have gone to the hospital.

“I am very, very happy for Oxfam coming here. In our traditional custom, when we’re happy, we scream. I want to scream but we’re in a closed room! So I just want to say that I’m very thankful that they’ve sent this training.”

El Niño will see millions of poor and vulnerable people pushed even deeper into poverty. Take action to save lives at www.oxfam.org.nz/elniño. **WNZ**

- *The Water New Zealand Board walked, jogged and cycled the 111 kilometre long Waikato River Trail in mid-January over their summer break as their main fundraising event to raise funds for the Oxfam Water Challenge for charity in February 2016. The main purpose is to raise funds for improved sanitation in Papua New Guinea. See page 2.*