

El Niño 2026–27 in the East and Horn of Africa

A predictable displacement crisis, and how to prevent it

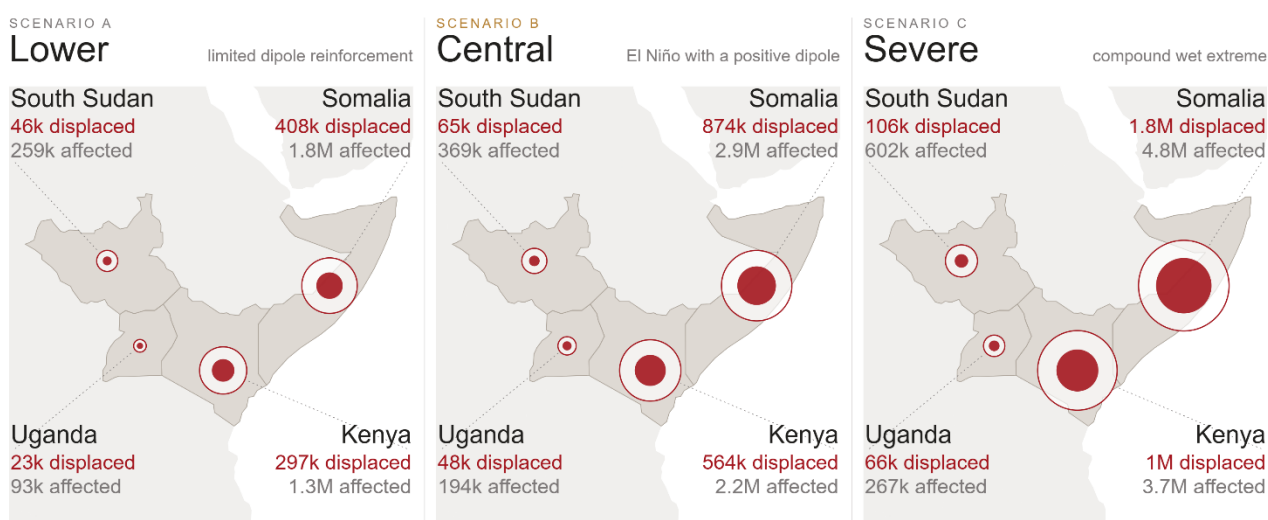
El Niño is underway and strengthening over the Pacific, with a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) emerging, raising concern over a return of the exceptionally wet conditions seen in late 2023, when El Niño and a positive IOD brought catastrophic flooding to the Horn of Africa after years of drought. El Niño's effects are not uniform: drier-than-normal conditions are already affecting Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda and parts of Kenya, while the October-December season is expected to bring heavier rainfall and flood risk across equatorial East Africa, including southern Somalia, southern Ethiopia and much of Kenya. DRC's [El Niño Through a Displacement Lens](#) analysis finds that current forecasts point to one of the strongest events on record through the remainder of 2026 and into early 2027. As in 2023, the humanitarian consequences will not be determined by rainfall alone: they will depend on who is exposed, how vulnerable they already are, and how much time responders have before the rains peak. For populations that are already displaced, El Niño rarely introduces an isolated new hazard. It compounds vulnerabilities that already exist, and it can trigger cascading effects across several sectors at once.

A season East Africa cannot afford to repeat

In 2023, El Niño-enhanced floods affected over 3 million people and displaced almost 2 million across Somalia, Kenya, South Sudan and Uganda, including over 1.2 million in Somalia alone, with flood-affected towns such as Beledweyne submerged for weeks. DRC's [scenario-based modelling](#) for the October-December 2026 season across these four countries points to displacement on a scale that could match or exceed 2023. Under a scenario broadly consistent with current seasonal weather forecasts, around 1.6 million people could be displaced across them; if the season becomes significantly wetter, that figure could rise to as many as 3 million, with total affected populations ranging from 3.4 to 9.3 million.

Estimated OND 2026 flood impact by country and scenario

Circle area is proportional to people. Outer ring: people affected. Inner disc: people displaced. Median estimates for OND 2026.



Exposure is not evenly spread. In Somalia, some of the clearest risk sits along the Juba and Shabelle river corridors and in the informal settlements around Mogadishu, Galckayo and Baidoa, where [close to 2 million IDPs](#) already live in flood-prone areas. In Ethiopia, poor Kiremt rains are already putting pressure on communities in parts of the central, eastern, and northeastern areas, while heavier rainfall later in the year

would bring flood risks in the south and south-east. In Kenya, the Tana River-Garissa-Dadaab corridor and the north-eastern border counties - [currently hosting close to 426,000 refugees](#) - sit squarely inside the strongest rainfall signals for October-December. South Sudan and Uganda face a related but distinct dynamic: as the Karamoja cluster illustrates, drought and resource scarcity are already converging with cross-border tension. While exact locations of where flooding or drought will strike are highly uncertain, the aforementioned locations and maps show where the consequences would be worst if affected, and where already vulnerable displaced populations would be hit the hardest.

Why El Niño hits displaced people the hardest

Flooding and drought can force secondary displacement, damage shelters, overwhelm drainage, and contaminate water supplies, while at the same time disrupting livelihoods, education, health services and, in the case of floods, humanitarian access and critical infrastructure. Climate shocks also raise protection risks directly, including gender-based violence, family separation, child protection concerns, exposure to trafficking, and the loss of civil documentation that people need to access services or prove tenure.

The reason behind this is straightforward: refugees, internally displaced people and returnees are disproportionately concentrated in hazard-prone locations such as floodplains, informal urban settlements and drought-affected rural areas, often with insecure land tenure, degraded infrastructure and limited access to essential services.

DRC's rapid needs assessment from March 2026 in Beledweyne and Baidoa, Somalia, found that 74 percent of surveyed IDPs were living in shelters made from sticks, plastic sheeting and corrugated iron, and that 92 percent were already struggling to access enough food before this season's rains had even begun. Even a moderate shock, layered onto that baseline, can escalate quickly into a humanitarian emergency.

A woman displaced by the 2023 floods in Beledweyne described how quickly the water inundated the town after the river burst its banks: she had time only to gather her family before "the water had already come in on us," and lost the food stores that were her household's main assets. Mohamed, a farmer in the same town, who has since raised the height of his riverbank defences, put the scale of the coming season in blunt terms: the wall he built to hold back the 2023 flood level is unlikely to be enough for what forecasters now expect.

The drought pathway is no less damaging, if slower-moving: crop failure, livestock loss and rising food prices are what push drought-affected households to move. Either way, the pattern holds: flooding damages shelter and contaminates water, drought erodes livelihoods and food security, and both disrupt education, health care and humanitarian access while raising protection risks, including gender-based violence, family separation, child protection concerns, trafficking, and the loss of civil documentation.

Cross-border data from DRC's [Mixed Migration Centre](#) reinforces this. Among refugees and migrants interviewed in Somalia, physical violence, robbery and detention were the most commonly reported risks along the journey, and children faced a comparable range of dangers. In [Kenya](#), where prolonged drought rather than a single flood event was the dominant driver of movement, well over half of respondents who reported abuse cited extortion, more than a third reported sexual violence, and most people who moved had already exhausted their coping options - selling livestock, changing crops, drawing down savings - for up to two years before they left. Movement, in other words, is usually a last resort rather than a first response, and the people least able to move at all are often the most vulnerable. Across the same surveys, those who stayed behind in disaster-affected areas mostly did so because they were caring for land, livestock or family members, or did not have the resources to move, not because they preferred to stay, which stood at just 9 percent.

For people already living in protracted displacement, repeated shocks also erode the ground gained toward self-reliance, local integration or return. Damage to housing, infrastructure, markets and public services can

reverse years of recovery for returnees and recently settled households, pushing them back into need just as they were beginning to move beyond it.

The case for anticipatory action

Humanitarian responses are often mobilised once a flood or drought has already generated humanitarian needs. Anticipatory action does not replace emergency response but complements it by acting before forecasted impacts peak, helping households protect assets, reduce losses and make safer decisions. Where impacts exceed what can reasonably be mitigated in advance, anticipatory action can transition seamlessly into traditional humanitarian response.

Anticipatory action in practice: Somalia 2023

Ahead of the 2023 floods in Beledweyne, Somalia, forecasts showed rising water levels well before the rains peaked. DRC delivered three cycles of unconditional cash to nearly 900 households based on those forecasts, not on observed damage, giving families the means and the information to relocate safely and on their own terms. When the floods hit and around 200,000 people were affected, more than 90 percent of targeted communities had already self-relocated, and a follow-up study found that supported households reported better food security, stronger income-generating capacity in displacement, and markedly fewer protection incidents than comparable communities that received post shock early recovery assistance (see the full [lessons-learned review](#)). Essential commodity prices in Beledweyne rose by 12 percent in the two weeks following the flood, with a 33 percent gap opening between the east and west banks of the Shebelle River once the bridge became impassable - a direct illustration that cash delivered ahead of the peak buys more than the same cash delivered after it.

Anticipatory action in practice: Kenya/Uganda 2026

On the Kenya-Uganda border (Karamoja region), DRC activated on a dual-hazard trigger: drought at Escalation phase and resource-based conflict at Early Warning on both sides of the border. Community assessments had already recorded drying water points, herders travelling further for pasture, distress livestock sales, and grazing agreements breaking down, early signals of climate-driven tension. Alongside cash assistance to over 1,200 households in Kenya and Uganda, the response pairs anticipatory financing with cross-border peacebuilding: reviving water-sharing agreements, deploying mobile peace monitors along livestock corridors, and agreeing safe-passage windows before herds concentrate and tensions escalate further.

Anticipatory action in practice: Ethiopia 2026

In July 2026, ahead of the peak of Ethiopia's Kiremt-season drought, DRC activated its first anticipatory action under Ethiopia's National Drought Anticipatory Action Framework, releasing €73,600 to some 850 households (around 5,300 people) in Afar's Kilbatti Rasu Zone 2 for livestock, water and dignity support before conditions deteriorate further, coordinated with the national Disaster Risk Management Commission and UN partners.

Too many communities lack the resources to respond to early warnings. Across MMC's surveys, only 45 percent of respondents in Kenya and 61 percent in Somalia had access to any early warning system before

they were displaced, and even where warnings were received, roughly one in five people said they lacked the resources to act on them. Anticipatory action, done well, closes both the information and resource gaps at once, which is why DRC considers it central to how the sector should respond to a forecast event of this scale.

Recommendations

- 1. Put displaced people at the centre of preparedness.** IDPs, refugees, returnees and host communities are frequently missing from national early-warning systems, disaster-risk plans and adaptation strategies. Their locations, mobility patterns and specific vulnerabilities should be built into these systems from the outset, not addressed only once an emergency materialises. In flood-prone locations such as Beledweyne, Baidoa, Dadaab, the Juba and Shabelle river corridors and informal settlements hosting displaced populations, authorities and humanitarian actors should identify relocation sites in advance, establish evacuation plans, and pre-position minimum services including water, sanitation, health referrals, protection monitoring and site management capacity before displacement occurs.
- 2. Finance anticipatory action alongside emergency response capacity.** Forecast-based support for at-risk and displacement-affected communities does not replace emergency response, but where it is possible to act ahead of the rains, it changes what that later response has to cover, and at what cost.
- 3. Include protection as integral to climate response,** not an add-on. GBV prevention and response, child protection, family tracing and documentation support should be built into El Niño preparedness and response plans and financed accordingly, rather than treated as a secondary sector. During DRC's 2023 Beledweyne anticipatory action activation, protection incidents were reduced and negative coping mechanisms decreased, helping avoid longer-term costs associated with family separation, child labour, loss of education and heightened protection risks. This should extend to populations who are unable to move despite wanting or needing to - the “trapped” or involuntarily immobile, who the data above shows make up a small but acutely vulnerable share of disaster-affected communities - through targeted in-situ support, and to dignified, rights-based planned relocation as a deliberate tool where remaining in place is no longer viable.
- 4. Support cross-border, multi-hazard approaches where climate and resource-based conflict intersect.** Where drought and resource scarcity are already driving cross-border tension, as in Karamoja, anticipatory action should be paired with conflict-sensitive and peacebuilding programming from the start - dual-hazard triggers, revived water-sharing agreements, mobile peace monitors and agreed safe-passage windows, modelled on DRC's Kenya-Uganda activation - rather than sequenced after tensions escalate. Dual-hazard triggers that reflect both environmental and conflict risks should become standard practice in areas where climate shocks increase competition over already scarce resources.
- 5. Domesticating and operationalising regional commitments.** National, cross-border and subnational actors should translate the Kampala Ministerial Declaration on Migration, Environment and Climate Change, the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance, the African Union's Africa Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI), the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), and other relevant mobility and protection instruments into practice at each of these levels - improving coordination, avoiding duplication of effort, and closing gaps in legal protection.

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