

Thousands of kids dying in northeast Nigeria, says survey

November 15 2016, by Michelle Faul



In this Monday, Aug. 29, 2016, file photo, a malnourished child is weighed on a scale at a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Thousands of children already have died of starvation and disease in Boko Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2016 quoting a new survey that is forcing Nigerian officials out of a state of denial. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba, File)

Thousands of children have died of starvation and disease in Boko

Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday quoting a new survey that is forcing Nigerian officials to stop denying the crisis.

The Paris-based organization hopes that official recognition of the calamity in which "thousands are dying" will help bring urgent aid before older children also start dying, Natalie Roberts, emergency program manager for northeast Nigeria, told The Associated Press.

A survey of two refugee camps in the northeastern city of Maiduguri shows a quarter of the expected population of under-5 children is missing, assumed dead, according to the organization. Under-5 mortality rates in the camps are more than double the threshold for declaring an emergency, Roberts said in a phone interview from Paris.

Speaking on her return from northeastern Borno state, the birthplace of Boko Haram's Islamic uprising, she said the absence of young children was striking.

"We only saw older brothers and sisters. No toddlers are straddling their big sisters' hips. No babies strapped to their mums' backs. It's as if they have just vanished," Roberts said.

Doctors Without Borders first sounded the alarm in June but senior officials of the National Emergency Management Agency managing the camps as late as September denied any child was suffering malnutrition and accused the doctors of exaggerating the crisis to attract donations. That was after The Associated Press published images of matchstick-thin children fighting for their lives at an intensive feeding center in Maiduguri, run by the France-based medical organization, also known as Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF.



In this Monday, Aug. 29, 2016, file photo, a mother feeds her malnourished child at a feeding centre run by Doctors Without Borders in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Thousands of children already have died of starvation and disease in Boko Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday quoting a new survey that is forcing Nigerian officials out of a state of denial. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba, File)

The crisis is aggravated by alleged theft of food aid by emergency management officials being investigated by Nigeria's senate.

"The difference now is that our figures have been checked by the statistician general, and we have official recognition from the government that they believe this is happening," Roberts said.

An estimated 75,000 children could die within a year because donors have provided only one-third of requested funding and twice as much, \$1 billion, is needed for the rest of the year and into 2017, says the

United Nations.

A vital funding conference in Geneva next month could save the day, otherwise "it won't be long before we could be in the painful position of having to turn away sick and starving children," says the U.S.-based Save the Children.



In this Monday Aug. 29, 2016 file photo, Mothers with their malnourished children wait for treatment at a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Thousands of children already have died of starvation and disease in Boko Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday, Nov. 15, 2016 quoting a new survey that is forcing Nigerian officials out of a state of denial. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba, File)

Some 2.6 million people including more than 1 million children have been driven from their homes by Nigeria's 7-year-old insurgency that has

killed more than 20,000 people, left food-producing fields fallow, disrupted trade routes and destroyed wells, bridges and entire towns.

President Muhammadu Buhari last month set up a presidential committee to coordinate aid and the rebuilding of the northeast, even as an end to the rainy season has brought a predictable upsurge in attacks on military outposts and urban suicide bombings by the Islamic extremists.

Buhari and Nigeria's military have said aerial bombardments and a ground offensive that have forced the insurgents out of most towns has the extremists on the run. But aid agencies say they can barely venture outside Maiduguri for fear of attack and are using helicopters to reach dangerous areas.

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