

In South Africa's drought, people grow desperate for drinking water

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Residents of Senekal, South Africa, line up for free water transported in by the government, Jan. 7, 2016. AP/Denis Farrell

SENEKAL, South Africa — The tattered, faded umbrellas bounce above a long line of people. The umbrellas are not being used as protection against rain, but against the sun. Some farmers are calling this the worst drought they've seen in South Africa. People in many rural towns saw the water in their kitchen taps stop flowing months ago.

The region has not had enough water for a very long time. The drought in South Africa has caused farmers to stop planting their crops. Cattle have been sold early when farmers could not bear to watch their slow, dry deaths.

The drought was caused by a weather pattern known as El Niño. It happens every two to seven years and raises the temperature of the Pacific Ocean. In turn, this affects the weather all over the world. The current El Niño has started to relieve a drought in the western United States while also creating a new one in southern Africa.

54 Million People Need Help

El Niño has caused floods in eastern African countries such as Somalia and Kenya. Meanwhile South Africa, the southernmost country in Africa, has had an endless series of dry days. Simple drinking water has become very valuable for many of the country's 54 million people.

Government officials are now sending tap water by truck to thirsty communities in long drives across the country.

Salman Seeday is a volunteer truck driver. He recently delivered water to the town of Senekal in South Africa. He described how people ran toward the arriving trucks, grabbed the bottles that were offered and guzzled down the contents.

Thirst "Will Bring Tears To Your Eyes"

"Within two or three minutes we had a queue of 2,000 or 3,000 people," he said. "It's heartbreaking. What you see there will bring tears to your eyes."

Here in one of Africa's most advanced nations, the availability of drinking water has become an emergency. Five of South Africa's nine regions have been declared disaster zones. The country, which normally exports corn to other countries, will have to import up to 6 million tons of grain.

People wait all day in long lines for water, and even then, they do not always receive all the water they need. "We have to wake up at 12 o'clock at night for the queue. Sometimes we sleep here," said Vinus Nkala, 36, who lives with her three children just outside of Senekal.

Water delivered by the local municipality was "muddy" and had given some children diarrhea. This made some people afraid to use it for drinking, said Nkala. After the first rain in months fell on a recent Monday, people rushed with buckets to collect the dirty water for washing clothes.

Long Lines Wait In Sun For Trucks

The voluntary water trucking efforts began late last month.

One driver, who goes only by the name of Theba, has been trucking water donated by South African companies. His operation delivered more than 26,000 gallons of water to Senekal on Thursday. A long line formed instantly under the blazing sun as the trucks pulled up.

"We couldn't not do it. We could not sit back and watch people die and kill people out of thirst," he said.

"We needed to get water to people as quickly as possible. We are totally aware of the fact that this is not the most practical solution. But the people need water now. You can see the queues. And while we're getting a project together to put tanks into these areas, at least we can get water to the people."

City Water "Not Good Enough"

"I never seen anything like this in my life. We never felt we could experience this thing," said Maduna Nkosama, 27, of Senekal. His family of nine was too poor to buy water. Instead, they have been relying on tankers provided by the city, even though they question where this water came from.

“We don’t know where the municipality got that water. That water is not good enough, especially for the kids. Some kids have been getting sick,” Nkosama said.

Some people say the water crisis is a result of the national government’s failure to spend more money on water infrastructure. They think the government should have built more water storage tanks and pipe systems. Others complain that city governments have not responded effectively to the crisis.