

## Drought

02/19/06 A Prayer for Rain The Anatomy of Drought: It isn't what you think, you know, not unless you've experienced it yourself. Sure, it's about a lack of rain, it's about dust and withering crops, but it's about way more than simply that. That's like the science of drought, and a drought, well drought is all about effect. And the effect, now that is something else... Take my friend from Monduli: his family are nomadic herders, Masaai, up in one of the areas hardest hit. His father has had two hundred head of cattle, a herd he's been developing for more than twenty years. The animals have been dying since about Christmas and he is already down to fewer than fifty left. He says there is still water in the salt lakes so the animals can drink, but there is nothing at all sprouting from the hard baked earth.

So I say, "Well, at least you can eat the meat," and he looks at me like I am the stupidest guy around. First, he says, nobody can eat that much meat, the carcasses are laying everywhere, just rotting on the ground. Second, he says, you can't sell the meat because by the time they starve to death there's nothing left to sell. Then it's like he can hear me thinking, "Why don't you kill them while they still have some meat left?" So he answers the dumbest guy he's met. He looks at his hands, embarrassed by his hope. He speaks quietly, he says, "We keep praying it will rain." Then he looks up, and I'm looking into the eyes of an economist now. "Besides," he says, "have you seen the price of meat?" And that's the next thing - you'd figure in a drought the price of food would go up, and it does - for everything but meat. The price of meat has fallen because there's this sudden massive glut. The good news is that the government has promised that no one will be left to starve - and they are clearly making every effort to keep their word. Fortunately, in this day and age, keeping people from starving is mainly a question of timing and political will. The government is moving grain and calling for international assistance. They are telling farmers not to raise their prices...but, of course, there is a problem with that as well. These folk are subsistence farmers and they don't have very much to sell; way less than they had in prior years - and in prior years they didn't make out well. So with less to sell, they basically have to sell for more, especially when they are paying more themselves. So how bad is it? I heard about a lack of rain when we arrived two years ago, but last year - for example - was a super year for rain. I asked a couple of wazee how this one compares to other years, expecting they would say, "Worst drought in three years," or maybe five; I never expected ten. They discussed for a minute, looked at me, and said they both remembered a drought like this back around nineteen-seventy. This one here, right now today, is the worst one in east Africa in more than thirty years. One last thing: here in Dar es Salaam the effect of no rain is mainly seen in nearly empty dams. That means electricity is rationed because the power comes from dams. Now the water level is so low that the power is essentially shut down. It's so low that now even the city water has ceased to flow. Anyone who can possibly afford one is scoping out generators. The price for the little ones (big enough to run a couple of lights and keep the refrigerator on) has gone from \$1500 to \$2000 in the past two weeks, and even at that they in are very short supply. I heard a couple of women at work talking about trying to find a generator the other day. They were talking about the difficulty of taking out loans to pay for the machines, then the need to pay to fill them up with gas. Someone has to be around to turn them off if/when the power comes back on, and then be there to start them up again when the power suddenly goes back off. And someone's got to schlep the jerry cans and fill them up with gas. But it is better than the alternative, they both agree. It's better than having to shop everyday on the way home from work (here is no fast food nation, no Lean Cuisines or ready-mades)... And this the discussion of the lucky ones, the upper class, the top link in the chain...and all in all, we all agree, we need to pray for rain.