Darfur teetering “on the verge of mass starvation”

Peter Moszynski *London*

The threat of famine is looming in the Darfur region of western Sudan, warns Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), whose recent study shows “dangerously high levels of malnutrition and mortality with a rapidly deteriorating food security situation.”

The United Nations says that over two million people are now affected by the crisis, and MSF warns that “the whole population is teetering on the verge of mass starvation.”

The charity’s report cites a nutritional survey conducted in Wadi Saleh and Mukjar provinces that found that a fifth of children aged under 5 years had acute malnutrition.

About 5% of the under 5s in the families surveyed had died in the past three months. MSF said: “These levels of mortality are well in excess of death rates defined as an emergency.”

There was also “massive excess mortality in those over 5 with 60% of all deaths reported due to war trauma—and further excess death from malaria and diarrhoea. These results show an extreme level of needs in Darfur caused by violence, hunger and vulnerability to simple diseases.”

Jean de Cambry, the charity’s field coordinator, said: “The situation is very dangerous, especially for the many children and adults who are already malnourished. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the sanitation facilities are currently totally inadequate in most of the refugee camps. In one of them, there is one latrine per 400 refugees. This is 20 times greater than the international standard.”

MSF warns that the whole population faces the threat of starvation in the very near future unless substantial food distributions can be organised: “As the entire population is further weakened by hunger, they will only become more vulnerable to disease. The threats of malaria and diarrhoeal diseases will only further increase with the onset of rains. The death and suffering is set to escalate to catastrophic proportions.”

The organisation complains that relief workers continue to be obstructed, whereas the militias responsible for the crisis remain unhindered by the government of Sudan: “In spite of government of Sudan promises to expedite the provision of

assistance, bureaucratic barriers placed in front of aid agencies significantly inhibit immediate action. In addition, the GOS has not taken action to stop violence against civilians.”

Another new report, by the International Crisis Group, a Brussels based think tank, warns that huge numbers could die: “What UN officials have already called the worst humanitarian situation in the world today could claim an additional 350,000 in the next nine

months, mainly from starvation and disease. Many more will die if the direct killing is not stopped.”

The report also says: “Urgent international action is required on several fronts if ‘Darfur 2004’ is not to join ‘Rwanda 1994’ as shorthand for international shame.” □

Current Crisis, Future Catastrophe in Darfur is accessible at www.msf.org
Sudan: Now or never in Darfur is accessible at www.icg.org

The onset of rains in Darfur is causing problems for aid access

Italians are offered “do it yourself” paternity testing kits

Sophie Arie *Rome*

An Italian businessman has triggered debate in Italy by advertising “do it yourself” paternity testing kits, with which men can check their children’s DNA without telling their wives.

The kit—which Aurelio Coppola has been advertising for €700 (£470; \$840) each since May—allows suspicious fathers to take a swab from their child’s mouth, and their own, and send

it to a laboratory for testing.

The results, which Coppola claims are “over 99.99% accurate,” are posted or emailed to the anxious parent about a week later.

Mr Coppola is among the latest to see a business opportunity in providing “peace of mind” for suspicious fathers. As a result, Italy is the latest European country plunged into debate over whether DIY pater-

nity testing invades an individual’s right to privacy.

“It is a simple service, meant to help men get rid of their doubts,” says Mr Coppola. His advert for the kit appears alongside sex tips and scantily clad models in one of Italy’s glossy men’s magazine. The kit can also be ordered through his website (www.testpaternita.it).

“I’m a businessman,” said Mr Coppola. “I change sector every now and then. There’s certainly a market for this. I’m just testing it now to see if it’s big enough.”

So far, there are few restrictions on the sale of such kits in Italy, where a health ministry

committee is assessing the ethical implications but controls are not yet in place.

The easy to use kits, used by thousands in the United States, have been introduced in several European countries in recent years including Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and Britain. The tests can also be used to identify donor parents and biological parents of adopted children. But France has been so concerned about potential invasions of privacy that it has banned the kits. In Belgium there are strict regulations, obliging both parents to agree to the test. □