

Ethiopia

El Niño Food-Security Scenario Brief

DATE 5 Sep 2026

HORIZON Six quarters, September 2026 – February 2028

BASIS Public sources, each cited with its date

1. Answer first

A strong El Niño is now verified in progress, and its dominant effect on Ethiopia is adverse: suppressed 2026 Kiremt rains threaten the October–December meher harvest, which supplies most of the national cereal crop. On a plausible strong-event path, the share of classified food-security areas in Phase 3 (Crisis) or worse rises from the current 25.6 percent to roughly 31–37 percent at the peak, most likely in the December 2026 – May 2027 lean-season stretch, with the modal peak plausibly late in that window. A very strong event could push it toward 34–42 percent — approaching or exceeding the worst area-severity reading of the past decade. The food-insecurity peak falls inside, not beyond, this brief's horizon.

2. The anchor, and how to read it

The last national IPC assessment for Ethiopia dates to 30 June 2021, more than five years before this edition, so this brief carries no IPC population figure. Scenarios are scaled in relative terms — the share of classified geographic units in Phase 3 or worse, a severity measure, never a headcount. No number in this document should be read as “people in Crisis.”

The severity signal is the **FEWS NET Food Security Outlook for Ethiopia**, reporting date 1 June 2026: of 1,161 classified units, 623 in Phase 1, 241 in Phase 2, and 297 in Phase 3 or worse — 25.6 percent of classified areas (Phase 4+ units are not separable in this feed). The near-term projection in the same outlook is unchanged from the current situation, implying FEWS NET did not, as of 1 June, anticipate deterioration within its own projection window. That window predates the strongest phase of the current El Niño, so the projection cannot be read as contradicting this brief's scenarios.

Supporting context from the national composite risk profile (as of 5 September 2026): food-security sub-score 72/100 with “roughly a fifth of the population in severe food insecurity” — a modelled narrative, not a current IPC estimate; approximately 1.9 million internally displaced people (International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking, 2024 vintage; the active conflict in Amhara and Oromia is likely to have raised that figure since); roughly 155,000 refugees originating from Ethiopia (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025); inflation 13.2 percent year-on-year (IMF, 2025). The scenarios rest on three verified inputs — the ENSO state, the FEWS NET outlook and the seasonal teleconnection record — and claim no separate short-term food-security trajectory.

3. The verified ENSO state

- **Oceanic Niño Index, JJA 2026: +1.80** — strong El Niño (up from +1.39 in MJJ). Source: US Climate Prediction Center ONI series.
- **Niño-3.4 weekly sea-surface-temperature anomaly: +2.60 °C**, week of 26 August 2026. Source: CPC weekly SST series.
- **CPC ENSO Alert System: El Niño Advisory, issued 13 August 2026.**

The advisory carries **no verified probabilities** for event duration or peak strength beyond the advisory status itself. The three scenarios below are therefore conditional paths, not a verified probability distribution; the verified fact is that the event is already strong and intensifying as of late August 2026.

4. Teleconnection sign, verified by season

The sign is season-dependent, and the literature supports it with very unequal confidence across rows:

SEASON	PERIOD	TILT UNDER EL NIÑO	STRENGTH	EVIDENTIARY FOOTING
Kiremt (main rains, main meher crop)	Jun–Sep 2026	Dry — strongest in central and northern highlands; weaker or reversed in parts of the southwest	Moderate, regionally uneven	Well established (Korecha & Barnston 2007; Segele et al. 2009; Diro et al. 2011; FEWS NET/IRI operational record)
Deyr/hagaya (southeastern lowlands only)	Oct–Dec 2026	Wet tilt, contingent on Indian Ocean conditions — a positive Indian Ocean Dipole co-occurring drives flooding; a neutral or negative Dipole can leave the deyr near-normal or dry	Moderate, conditional	Established; the most Dipole-dependent teleconnection in the region
Belg (secondary rains, south/east)	Mar–May 2027	No reliable single sign — influence is regionally fragmented and statistically weak; a decaying El Niño often leaves March–May East African rains below normal, but 2015–16 saw good Belg rains	Weak, sign ambiguous	Fragmented literature (Segele et al. 2009); late-winter Pacific–Indian Ocean pattern dominates

The Kiremt row is the load-bearing row, and it is the well-supported one. The 1982/83, 1987, 1997 and 2015 droughts establish the canonical failure mode, but the correlation is probabilistic and spatially uneven: 2002 and 2009 show heterogeneity rather than uniform national deficit, and 2018 combined a weak-to-moderate El Niño with above-normal Kiremt in many central highland zones. The deyr and Belg rows are conditional tilts and are read as such, not as forecasts. ENSO explains part of East African rainfall variance; the Indian Ocean Dipole modulates both the deyr and the Belg, and trigger T5 tracks it.

Net assessment: adverse, on the strength of the Kiremt row. The meher season — most of national cereal production — takes the dry penalty with the best-supported teleconnection in the table. The wet-side rows are either conditional (deyr) or sign-ambiguous (Belg), and in the lowlands wetness brings flood damage to floodplain agriculture and livestock rather than relief. Ethiopia also enters this event under drought stress: the Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System catalogue records an **Orange agricultural-drought alert covering Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Somalia, 21 April – 30 July 2026** — a documented pre-El Niño drought episode; that entry carries no human-impact figures.

Timing of the hunger peak. The arithmetic of a failed meher harvest is that hunger surfaces four to six months after the rains fail, which points first at the **December 2026 – February 2027 window** — consistent with the documented 1997 and 2015 experience, where severe outcomes concentrated late in the deyr and into the deep lean season. The brief’s scenarios therefore treat **December 2026 through May 2027 as a single elevated plateau**, with the modal peak plausibly February–May 2027 and deterioration beginning to register in the December–February quarter; recovery by Jun–Aug 2027 depends on Belg behaviour, whose sign varies from event to event, and is treated as a possibility, not a baseline.

5. Counterfactual and scenarios

5.1 THE NO-EL-NIÑO COUNTERFACTUAL

The counterfactual is a neutral-ENSO Ethiopia in September 2026 with the FEWS NET 1 June baseline (25.6 percent of classified areas in Phase 3+), near-normal Kiremt rains, a normal meher harvest, and no ENSO tilt on the deyr or Belg. Under this path, area severity is assumed to drift in a band of roughly **24–27 percent Phase 3+** through the horizon, with the usual seasonal hump in the February–May lean season. This is a modelled construct, stated with medium confidence; conflict-driven displacement in Amhara and Oromia is a risk present in every path, and trigger T7 tracks it.

5.2 SCENARIOS AS DELTAS (SHARE OF CLASSIFIED UNITS IN PHASE 3+, VERSUS THE COUNTERFACTUAL)

Deterioration begins to bite in the **December 2026 – February 2027 quarter**, when the harvest shortfall becomes visible, and holds through the **February–May 2027 lean season**, which carries the largest deltas. The peak falls near the middle of this brief's horizon, not beyond it.

QUARTER	COUNTERFACTUAL (NO EL NIÑO)	MODERATE (ONI PEAKS ~1.5–1.9)	STRONG (ONI ~2.0–2.4)	VERY STRONG (ONI ≥2.5)
Sep–Nov 2026 (meher harvest)	25–26%	+1 to +3 pts	+3 to +6 pts	+5 to +9 pts
Dec 2026–Feb 2027 (shortfall visible; deyr flood risk in southeast, conditional)	25–27%	+2 to +4 pts	+4 to +8 pts	+7 to +12 pts
Mar–May 2027 (lean season; largest deltas)	26–27%	+3 to +5 pts	+5 to +10 pts	+8 to +15 pts
Jun–Aug 2027 (recovery if the Belg performs)	25–26%	+1 to +3 pts	+2 to +6 pts	+3 to +9 pts
Sep–Nov 2027	24–25%	0 to +2 pts	0 to +4 pts	+1 to +6 pts
Dec 2027–Feb 2028	24–25%	0 to +1 pts	0 to +3 pts	+1 to +4 pts

Uncertainty bands sit on the deltas, not the levels. All figures are MODELLED (expert judgement anchored on the teleconnection record), medium confidence, scaled in FEWS NET area-severity terms. The implied strong-path peak is **31–37 percent** (counterfactual 26–27 plus delta +5 to +10); the very-strong path implies **34–42 percent**. By the horizon's tail the very-strong and strong paths differ by a point or two; that narrowing assumes the event decays on a historical schedule, and if a very-strong event persists into spring 2027 the tail deltas run higher.

Directional calibration against measured analogues (same metre — Phase 3+ area share, not comparable counts):

- **El Niño 2015–16**, outlook of June 2016: **15.8 percent** of 678 units in Phase 3+.
- **El Niño 2023–24**, outlook of June 2024: **30.3 percent** of 1,141 units.
- **Today**, outlook of June 2026: **25.6 percent** of 1,161 units.

Unit boundaries and assistance assumptions changed between these outlooks, so shares, never counts, are comparable — and these are directional checks on severity, not scenario anchors. Against 2015–16, Ethiopia enters this event from a baseline roughly **10 points worse** than that event's corresponding reading. Against 2023–24 the comparison is of a different kind: 30.3 percent is a June 2024 reading a year into that event, not a starting point. In short: the current baseline is roughly 10 points worse than the 2015–16 analogue's reading, and about 5 points below the 2023–24 event's June-2024 outcome reading — so the current strong path need not generate much additional deterioration to reach territory Ethiopia already occupied in mid-2024. A strong-event path peaking near 31–37 percent would match or exceed the 2023–24 June reading.

Relative likelihood. The CPC advisory states no event-duration probabilities, and this brief states none. What is verified: the event is already strong and still intensifying in late August. On that basis, the strong path is the central case for planning; the moderate path requires a rapid decay that current weekly anomalies do not support; the very-strong path requires the +2.60 °C weekly anomaly to be sustained or exceeded at ONI-relevant scales for months. All paths assume a decay into spring 2027 consistent with historical event lifespans, and each monthly CPC advisory from 10 September 2026 tests that assumption (trigger T1).

6. Trigger matrix

Thresholds are set above the peak arithmetic of the tier below them, so each trigger confirms its tier rather than the one beneath it.

#	TRIGGER (OBSERVABLE, DATED)	WINDOW	IF TRIPPED	CONFIDENCE
T1	CPC advisory of 10 Sep 2026 or later shows ONI $\geq +2.0$ or upgraded alert language	Sep–Oct 2026	Shift planning to the strong/very - strong column; pre-position meher - failure response	High (verifiable directly)
T2	Kiremt rainfall totals for June–September 2026 confirmed 20%+ below normal on central highland stations, or FEWS NET notes significantly below -normal meher production	Oct–Nov 2026	Lock in at least the strong path; activate lean-season (Dec 2026 – May 2027) caseload planning	Medium-high
T3	FEWS NET outlook Phase 3+ area share crosses 33% (above the moderate path's peak of 29–32%) in any update after October 2026	Oct 2026 onward	Strong path confirmed; humanitarian appeal scale-up warranted	Medium
T4	FEWS NET Phase 3+ share crosses 38% (above the strong path's peak of 31–37%), or any Phase 4 area classification appears in a central highland or conflict-affected cropping zone	Any point	Very-strong path; treat as national-emergency-level deterioration, above the 2023–24 June reading	Medium
T5	Confirmed deyr - season flood displacement or floodplain crop/livestock losses in Somali region exceeding typical deyr years — relevant when Indian Ocean Dipole conditions support the wet deyr tilt	Nov 2026–Jan 2027	Add flood caseload on top of drought caseload in the southeast; paths are not mutually exclusive by region	Medium, conditional on the Dipole state
T6	Belg 2027 rains arrive early and substantially above normal in southern/eastern zones	Mar–Apr 2027	Begin drawing down scenario deltas one quarter early; recovery could beat the table — the Belg sign is weak and ambiguous, so this trigger is watched rather than assumed	Low-medium
T6b	Belg 2027 rains materially below normal in Belg-receiving zones	Mar–May 2027	Extend elevated deltas through Jun–Aug 2027; the recovery column of the table does not materialise; peak deterioration persists a quarter beyond the modal window	Low-medium
T7	Escalation in Amhara/Oromia conflict further restricts humanitarian access or displaces 500,000+ additionally	Continuous	Deltas understate impact; conflict and drought compound in the same areas; the counterfactual itself moves upward	Medium

7. What this brief rests on

- **Area severity, not headcount.** Every scenario here is a shift in the FEWS NET Phase 3+ area share; a new national IPC assessment (the last dates to 30 June 2021) would add a population figure.
- **Likelihood stated qualitatively.** The event's duration and peak strength are read month by month through the CPC advisories (T1); section 5 gives the relative likelihood of each path.

- **The Kiremt row carries the headline.** It is the best-supported teleconnection; the deyr wet signal depends on the Indian Ocean Dipole and the Belg sign is weak, so both are watched through triggers T5, T6 and T6b.
- **National hazard feeds** carry no live alert as of 5 September 2026 beyond the April–July drought episode (GDACS). This brief reads national and seasonal signals; landslides, localised floods and access constraints sit at sub-national scale.
- **Conflict displacement** is carried at its 2024 vintage (about 1.9 million, IOM Displacement Tracking), and trigger T7 tracks further displacement in Amhara and Oromia.

Watch next: each monthly CPC ENSO advisory from 10 September 2026 (T1), the first post-harvest FEWS NET outlook in or after October 2026 (T3), and any field assessment of meher production by the Food and Agriculture Organization's Global Information and Early Warning System in November. Those three observations, in that order, will resolve most of the uncertainty band in this brief.