Mixed conditions across East Africa triggered by an early March – May onset

Key Messages

- Early long rains onset across most parts of the region including Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi and Belg cropping regions of Ethiopia ensured favourable planting conditions. However, many farmers were not prepared to take advantage of this as the October–December season's crop was still in the fields. In addition, there were concerns whether the early onset was a false start discouraging some farmers from planting early. Heavy rainfall in Kenya also limited early planting which may negatively impact overall production.
- Extremely heavy rainfall in early March across central and western Kenya as well as southern Ethiopia led to devastating floods claiming lives and property.
- Rapid vegetation and surface water improvements can be observed across most pastoral regions of Kenya following extremely heavy rainfall in March. However, conditions across southeastern Ethiopia and most parts of Somalia are yet to show any significant improvements following a hotter and dryer lean period in February and early March and a delayed establishment of the April to June Gu rains.
- The April outlook indicates below-average rainfall conditions across most parts of the region leading to concerns over already planted crops given that April is typically the peak rainfall month for the March–May season in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi.
- Ensemble outlooks indicate an early development of El Niño conditions in June raising concerns for the June through September season in Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan as well as the unimodal regions of Kenya and Karamoja region in Uganda. El Niño establishment in June is associated with a decrease in rainfall amounts in these regions. If El Niño conditions develop, beneficial rains are expected during the October through December period across bimodal East Africa.

March – May

Context: Between March and November, the following are the areas and names of the rainy seasons underway in parts of East Africa: Gu rains in Somalia; long rains in unimodal Uganda and Rwanda, and unimodal and bimodal Kenya; Season B rains (mid-February to May) in Burundi; belg rains (mid-February to May) in Ethiopia, as well as the diraac/sugum rains in the northern pastoral areas and gu/genna rains in the southern and southeastern pastoral areas of Ethiopia; and the first season rains in the bimodal areas within southwestern Ethiopia, southwestern South Sudan, and northern Uganda.

The March–May rainfall season began earlier than usual in mid-February across much of East Africa, (figure 1) including Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and the belg cropping regions of Ethiopia and late-January in Burundi. This early onset of up to 30 days in some regions can be attributed to the early northward shift of the rainfall tropical front as well as an active Madden Julian Oscillation (MJO). These heavy rains have led to a rapid replenishment of the soil moisture (figure 2) and the surface water which is very critical especially in the pastoral regions following an extremely poor October–December rainfall season. Despite the favorable start, mechanized land cultivation was a challenge given extreme wet conditions especially across the breadbasket of north and south Rift Kenya including Trans Nzoia and Uasin Gishu counties in the North and Narok county in the South. Further, the early onset overlapped with the harvest period for the October through February cropping season catching some farmers unprepared. In addition, the early onset led to some confusion among farmers whether it is a false onset leading to uncertainty about whether to plant or not. This led to delayed planting which could ultimately limit overall production if the season ends on time.

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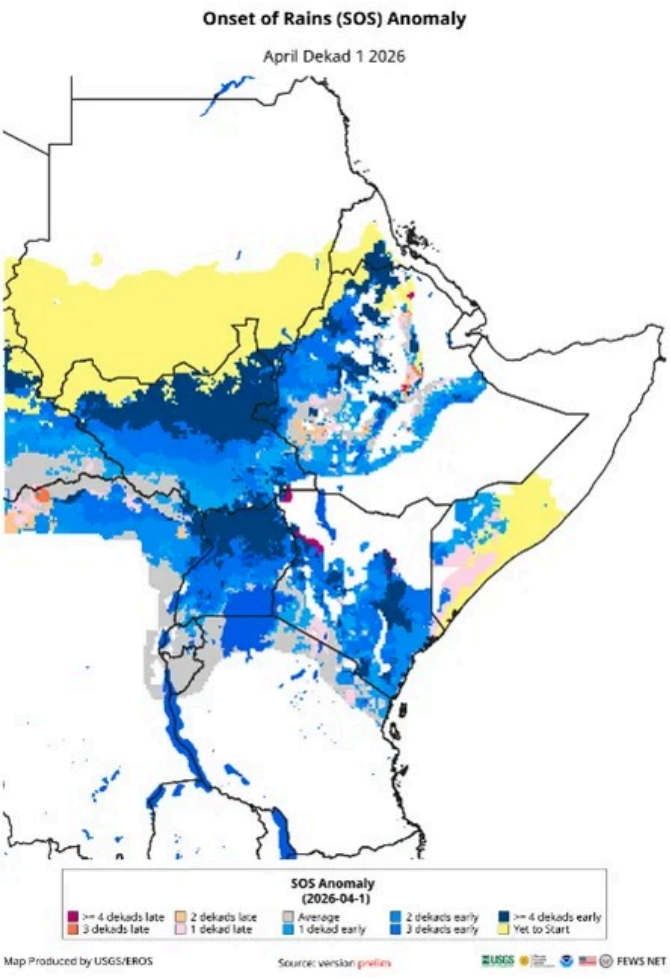
Figure 1

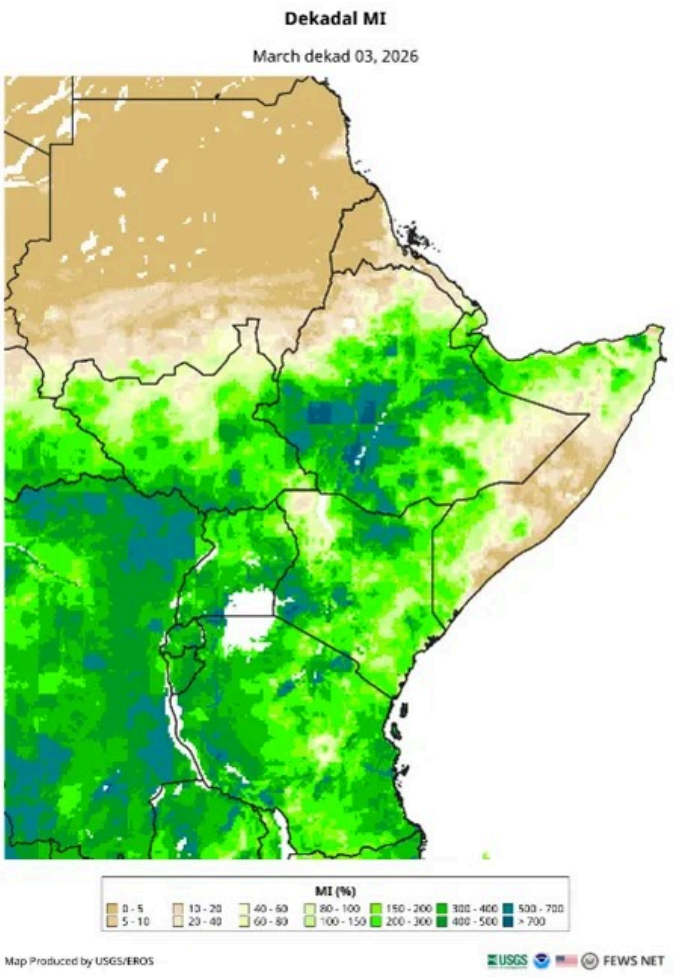
Onset (March 01 – May 31) 2026



Source: USGS/EROS

Figure 2

Soil Moisture (March 01 – March 31) 2026



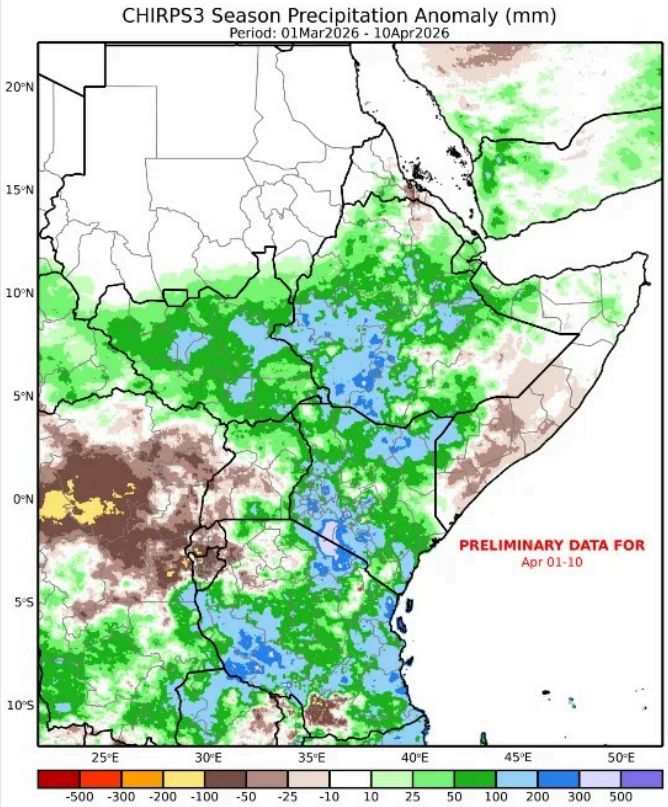
Source: USGS/EROS

Exceptionally heavy rainfall in early March resulted in widespread flooding across central and western Kenya and parts of southern Ethiopia. Cumulative rainfall totals exceeding 100mm - 200 mm within just 10 days were recorded in parts of Kenya and Ethiopia. Localized urban flooding was observed in Nairobi following rainfall amounts of over 160 mm within just 24 hours in some regions surpassing the average monthly rainfall for March. According to local media reports in Kenya, these intense rains triggered severe flooding that, by late March, had affected over 30 counties, displaced more than 34,700 people, and caused at least 110 fatalities nationwide. In Ethiopia, heavy rains in the first week of March led to a massive landslide in the Gamo zone of southern Ethiopia claiming approximately 100 lives.

Despite the extreme events, the above-average rainfall in March (figure 3) has led to significant improvements in surface water across Kenya. Rangeland conditions are also showing a steady improvement across the pastoral regions of Kenya, most parts southern Ethiopia, Karamoja region of Uganda as well as South Sudan (figure 4). These favorable conditions will significantly improve the extremely depleted livestock body conditions and reduce trekking distances. However, in southeastern Ethiopia and Somalia, water and pasture conditions remain significantly below-average due to a couple of factors such as a poor October–December season, a drier and hotter-than-average lean period (Jilal) in January through March coupled with a delayed April–June seasonal onset.

Figure 3

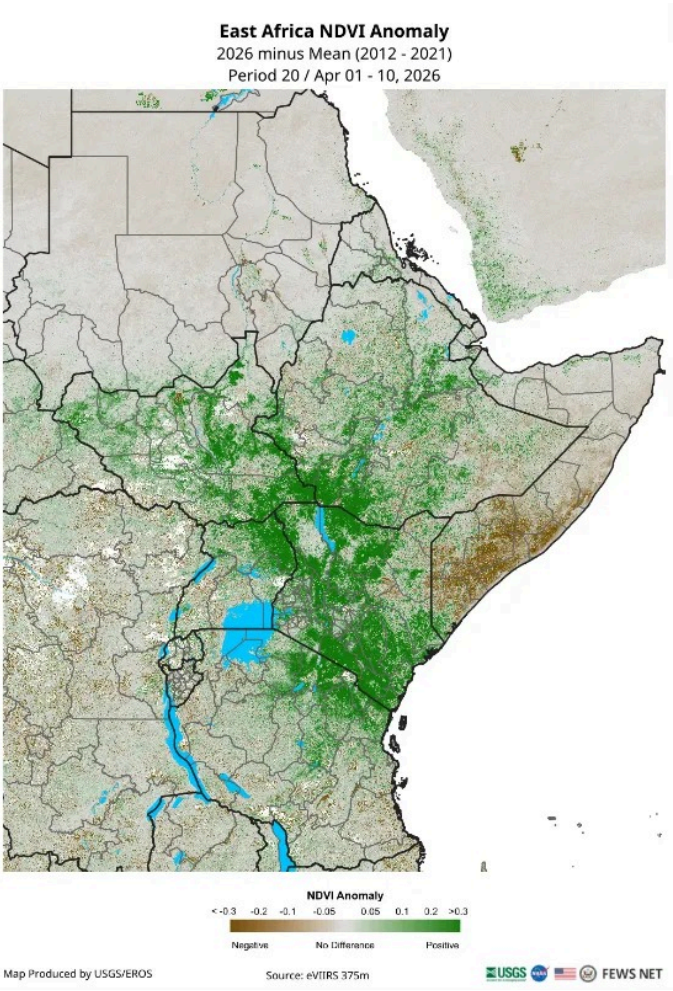
Rainfall Anomaly (March 01 – April 10) 2026



Source: CHC/UCSB

Figure 4

NDVI Anomaly (April 01 – April 10) 2026



Source: USGS/EROS

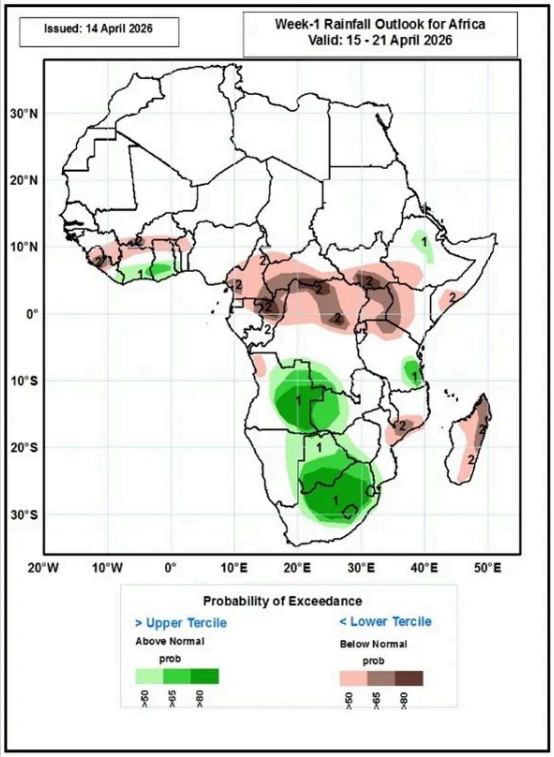
Agroclimatic Outlook

Despite the positive start to the season, April forecasts indicate a likelihood of below-average rainfall across western Kenya, most of Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda and the bimodal regions of southern South Sudan (figure 5). Typically, April is the peak month of the March–May season and this might lead to reduced yields at the end of season, especially for the late-planted crops due to moisture stress during early vegetative stages. Season-to-date rainfall totals are below-average in western Uganda, most of Rwanda and Burundi as well as southern Somalia (figure 3) While deficits in the high rainfall areas of Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi are unlikely to have significant impacts, conditions in Somalia remain concerning due to the delayed seasonal establishment.

The current climate models indicate that ENSO-neutral conditions are present with a growing likelihood of El Niño development by mid-2026. While uncertainty remains, an early establishment of El Niño, especially in June, are often associated with suppressed rainfall during the June–September season across the Meher growing regions of Ethiopia, and the unimodal regions of Sudan and South Sudan. In Kenya, similar relationships can also be observed across unimodal rainfall areas of the North Rift and Karamoja region in Uganda. This is critical given that the crops planted in March are usually flowering at this time of the season and require a substantial amount of rainfall to allow for grain filling. At the same time, El Niño is typically linked to enhanced rainfall during the October–December season, which could improve short rains production prospects later in the year for the bimodal regions of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi and the deyr regions of Somalia as well as pastoral south and southeastern Ethiopia.

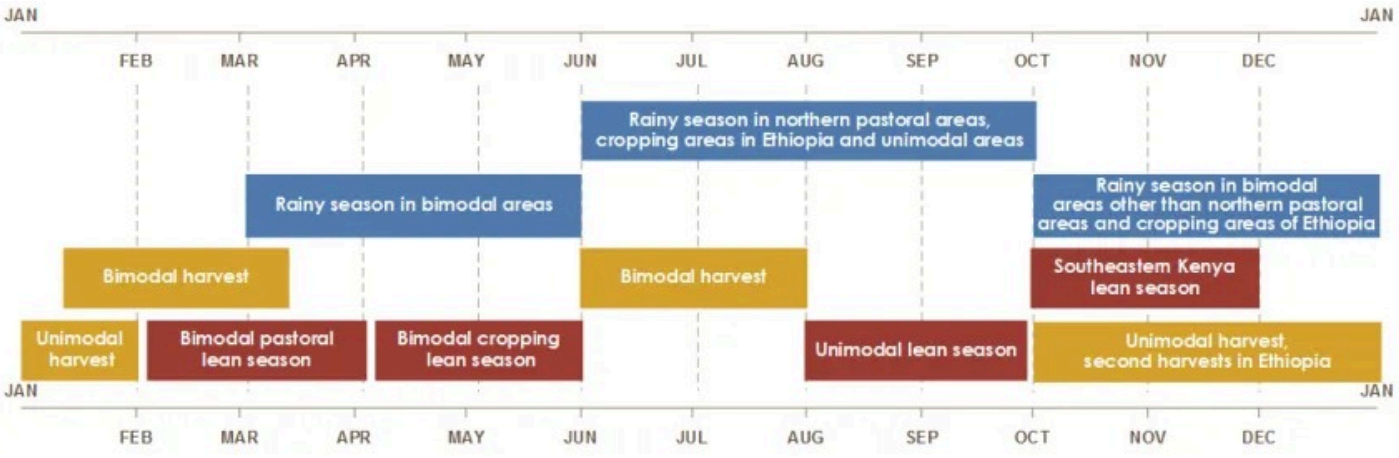
Figure 5

NOAA Rainfall Forecast for the period 15-21 April, 2026



Source: NOAA

Seasonal Calendar for a Typical Year



Source: FEWS NET

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Seasonal Monitor

FEWS NET's Seasonal Monitor reports are produced for Central America and the Caribbean, West Africa, East Africa, Central Asia, and Somalia every 10-to-30 days during the region's respective rainy season(s). Seasonal Monitors report updates on weather events (e.g., rainfall patterns) and associated impacts on ground conditions (e.g., cropping conditions, pasture and water availability), as well as the short-term rainfall forecast. Find more remote sensing information **here**.