Powerful El Niño could trigger major economic shocks worldwide – UN (WMO, OCHA) warns

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News

WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo and UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Tom Fletcher issued a joint warning in Geneva on 21 Oct 2026. WMO's Global Seasonal Climate Update says tropical Pacific sea-surface temperatures could be up to 3.8°C above average in Nov 2026 – Jan 2027, beating the 2015–16 record of 2.6°C. Saulo said it is 'off the monitoring charts that we have used for the past four decades'. Fletcher called the El Niño a 'wrecking ball' that could bring economic shocks for the global economy, conflict and displacement. The UN released $50 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) for 11 countries.

Key facts

Warning	21 Oct 2026, Geneva – WMO + UN humanitarian office (OCHA)
Forecast	Pacific SST up to 3.8°C above average (Nov–Jan); peak around Dec 2026
Previous record	2015–16 El Niño – 2.6°C
El Niño threshold	Eastern tropical Pacific 0.5°C above average
Aid	CERF – $50 million for 11 countries (incl. Chad, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, El Salvador)

Impacts	SE Asia – rain deficit, wildfires; East Africa – heavy rain; Latin America, Asia–Pacific – heat, drought, floods; ~50 million people at risk of hunger

Background

- Science: El Niño is abnormal warming of the central–eastern equatorial Pacific surface; La Niña is the opposite (cooling). Together with the 'Southern Oscillation' – a see-saw in air pressure – they form ENSO. Events recur every 2–7 years and last 9–12 months. The 'Niño 3.4' region (5°N–5°S, 170°W–120°W) is used for monitoring.
- Name: Peruvian fishermen called the warm current that appeared around Christmas 'El Niño' (Spanish for 'the boy' / 'the Christ child'). Warm water suppresses the upwelling of cold, nutrient-rich water, hurting Peru's anchovy fishery.
- Walker circulation: normally, easterly trade winds over the Pacific push warm water towards Indonesia–Australia. In El Niño they weaken and the Walker circulation shifts east. The Southern Oscillation (Tahiti–Darwin pressure difference) was identified by Sir Gilbert Walker, Director General of the IMD.
- Indian monsoon: El Niño usually weakens the southwest monsoon (June–Sept), causing drought and food inflation; La Niña usually strengthens it. The Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) is the temperature difference between the western and eastern Indian Ocean; a positive IOD can partly offset El Niño's adverse effect.
- Economy: droughts and floods can hit prices of rice, sugar, cotton, cocoa, coffee and maize, hydropower output, insurance and financial markets. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) is a UN specialised agency headquartered in Geneva; World Meteorological Day is 23 March.

Tamil Nadu link: Tamil Nadu gets most of its annual rain from the northeast monsoon (Oct–Dec). IMD studies show a tendency for normal or above-normal northeast monsoon rain over south-east peninsular India (Tamil Nadu) in El Niño years – the 2015 Chennai floods in a strong El Niño year are an example. It is a tendency, not a fixed rule.

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