

United Nations agencies document mounting world hunger

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The number of hungry people in the world now totals 828 million according to the 1998 annual report of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations. The State of Food and Agriculture 1998 (SOFA 98) reports that the new figure is greater than the 822 million people undernourished in 1990-92, a reversal of a 20-year decline in world hunger. One in five people in the world is chronically hungry, and it has been estimated that 30 million people in the world die every year from lack of food.

The new figures are taken from statistics compiled on world food production and consumption for the years 1994 to 1996, and were released for discussion at the November meeting of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Council. "Globally there is enough food to feed the world, but it is not equally distributed and many people do not have the means to buy it," said Hartwig deHaen, FAO assistant director-general and head of its Economic and Social Department.

The report goes on to say that the increase in the number of hungry people has been caused mainly by a lack of progress in reducing world poverty. Poverty and hunger are truly constant companions. Poor people, especially in the world's urban areas, spend up to 80 percent of their income on food.

There is a large food supply gap per person between the industrialized and the least developed countries. Figures cited in SOFA 98 show Denmark, Portugal, Ireland, the United States and Greece have the highest daily energy supply per person (DES) of the industrialized countries, 3340 kcal.

In the former Stalinist-ruled countries (referred to as "countries in transition" in the report), the rate is 2850 kcal. It averages only 2060 kcal in the poorer countries. Mozambique, Burundi, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia have the lowest average caloric intake. In

Somalia enough food is grown or imported (including that supplied by food aid programs) to provide only 1580 kcal per person.

Inequality exists not only between countries, but also within countries between the wealthy and the poor. In the United States, one of the most food rich countries in the world, 29 percent of children in the US are hungry or at risk of hunger, and the child poverty rate is double that of any other industrial country.

The amount of food available for international food aid, provided almost entirely by the advanced industrial countries, has fallen dramatically since the early 1990s. In 1997 and 1998 about 5.3 million tons yearly of cereal food aid shipments were dispensed, while in 1971-72 the US alone shipped 9.2 million tons.

The latter half of 1998 was punctuated by food crises on virtually every continent. Hurricane Mitch devastated crops in already impoverished Central American countries, leading the FAO to issue a special alert from their Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture. Fields cultivated by small farmers in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador were washed away. Banana, coffee and sugar plantations, where many people work, were ravaged.

These four Central American countries were among those averaging a per capita DES at or below 2540 kcal in 1994-96, before two years of crop failure and disaster. The devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch came on the heels of a poor El Nino-affected cereal crop in 1997.

The FAO also reports that natural disasters inflicted severe damage in the Asian countries of Bangladesh, China, some parts of India, and the Philippines in 1998. Thousands of people were killed while crops and infrastructure were heavily damaged. Drought in

Cambodia and a combination of drought and floods in Vietnam also devastated Southeast Asia between July and December of 1998. Asia has the largest number of undernourished people, more than 500 million.

Food emergencies were declared by the FAO for several countries in 1998. Far from being solely a result of natural disasters, economic disruptions and war also took a deadly toll in lost crop production. A section of the 1998 report attributes the "slowdown in income growth in Asia and the CIS" to a fall in the demand for global import of many commodities, resulting in a general fall in commodity prices.

An FAO fact-finding mission in mid-October found that cereal production in Russia fell a staggering 43 percent from the 1997 level in 1998. They attributed much of the fall to drought and high temperatures from mid-June to August 1998. The forecast of 50 million tons made by the FAO delegates compared to an average of 70.3 million tons in the period from 1993 to 1997 and a bumper crop of 86.7 million tons in 1997.

It is expected that this year in the Russian Federation poorer-grade grain normally used as cattle feed will be used for human consumption. Some of this grain has been freed up because of a decline in the number of livestock being raised. In December, the FAO issued a special warning that urban populations, particularly those with low income, were most at risk from food insecurity in the former Soviet Union.

Food aid now flows into Europe, not only to the displaced populations of the war-torn areas of the Balkans such as Bosnia, and more recently Kosovo, but also to other southeastern European countries. Aid went to Bulgaria four different years between 1991 and 1997 and to Albania in 1997. Not since the late 1970s has food aid been allocated to a European country.

The largest percentage of food-poor countries are in the region of Africa south of the Sahara. According to SOFA 98, the number of undernourished rose from 196 million in 1990-92 to 210 million in 1994-96 in sub-Saharan Africa. In one such country, Somalia, famine killed 300,000 in 1991 and 1992.

The link between poverty and hunger is dramatic in this region. Like their counterparts in Asia and the Caribbean, "Those countries with the highest of undernourished, 50 percent or more of their population, have all had stagnant or worsening per capita income. Income growth has stagnated or declined in most of the

countries where more than 30 percent of people are chronically hungry."

Caloric intake among people in this region is often too low to sustain productive work. Inequality in food within families results, as families must allocate enough food for the bread winner to be able to farm or do other work to put food on the table. Half of all diseases of the world's children could be eliminated through adequate diet. Chronically malnourished adults as well are more susceptible to disease. The list of diseases afflicting the population of sub-Saharan Africa in the recent period is long, including epidemics of malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis, sleeping sickness and the deadly HIV virus.

Within five years the majority of people in the world will live in cities. The number of impoverished city dwellers will have risen from 400 million in 1990 to 1 billion by 2000. Impoverished shanty towns, sickness, corruption and a lack of infrastructure needed to feed these massive urban populations will imperil ever-larger numbers of the world's population.

SOFA 97 states: "Problems of hunger are compounded by displacement associated with conflict, the immediate cause of most crises since the early 1990s. The hungry are often forced from their homes by civil or international strife." In the mid-1990s there were at least 50 serious armed conflicts ongoing in the world, increasing in intensity and numbers in poor countries, and often on a regional scale.

The use of food as a weapon has been made possible on a scale never seen before by the effect of globalization of agricultural markets. It is well known that Iraq's economy has been transformed, like that of many others, from food self-sufficiency to import dependency, compounding the deadly effects of the imperialist-imposed sanctions on that country's population.

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