

Hunger will increase in 1999, UN warns

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The head of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) has warned that 1999 will be another year of dramatic increases in world hunger levels. On the eve of the new year Executive Director Catherine Bertini warned: "Forecasts for 1999 show there will likely be an increase in the number of countries suffering emergencies and the number of people needing humanitarian assistance. We have to enter 1999 with an understanding that we may face an increased threat of famine, malnutrition and endemic hunger."

She said that the causes of food crises escalated throughout 1998. Climate catastrophes like Hurricane Mitch, renewed civil wars in Kosovo and Angola, continuation of a long-term conflict in southern Sudan, and economic collapses in Indonesia and Russia were cited. The number of people fed by WFP had already risen 17 percent from 1996 to 1997.

Bertini said, "The face of hunger is changing," and drew attention to a new and severe cause for hunger and food insecurity: the economic emergency. A World Food Program August appeal for food assistance for Indonesia included an estimate that more than 7.5 million people in that country were likely to experience acute household food shortages in the coming year.

Drought, poor harvests resulting from lack of fertilizer and other inputs, and newly impoverished layers of the population due to unemployment created millions of new hungry poor in that country alone.

Similar conditions in the Russian Federation led to calls for food assistance for the former Soviet Union. The effect of drought and general economic collapse put the most vulnerable sections of the population in great danger. Children, the elderly and others, especially in the cities, are expected to require hundreds of millions of dollars in food assistance to survive the brutal winter.

Several records were set in 1998. The largest emergency operation in any country in the WFP's

35-year history fed 19 million people in Bangladesh who required emergency assistance following massive flooding in the country. "The world has yet to fully grasp the magnitude of this disaster," Bertini said in September.

These were the longest lasting floods ever recorded in Bangladesh, and floodwaters covered more than two-thirds of the country at their peak. The government estimates the floods destroyed 300,000 metric tons of rice, 600,000 homes, 9,000 kilometers of roads, and 4,150 kilometers of flood protection embankment. Eight thousand five hundred schools were closed, some to be used as temporary shelter for the people that were flooded out of their homes. The unprecedented floods have been attributed to El Nino. Future conditions depend on the state of crops due to be harvested this month.

Another million victims of Hurricane Mitch have been aided by the UN. Other aid organizations are working throughout Central America, but the future there is very grim as well. Hurricane Mitch was the biggest natural disaster to strike Central America in 200 years and came on the heels of poor crop yields in 1997. The loss of crops, jobs, homes and lives has devastated the economies of these already impoverished countries. Aid agencies are gearing up to provide food well into the next century as a result of this disaster. Earlier, in September, Hurricane Georges put over 200,000 people in the Dominican Republic, St. Kitts, and Nevis at risk. The WFP also appealed for help for over 600,000 Cubans, mostly children, who were among those affected by a double affliction of hurricane and drought conditions.

The worst floods in China in over 40 years affected 223 million people, a fifth of China's population, in provinces along the Yangtze River and in the northeast region of the country. Three thousand people died and 13.8 million were evacuated. The WFP sent emergency

food to 5.8 million victims, and international aid will be needed there far into 1999.

In North Korea 6 million people are receiving rations under WFP auspices. In spite of the intervention of international agencies, a nutrition survey conducted together with UNICEF showed that two out of three children under five are moderately or severely malnourished and 62 percent of children have stunted growth, a symptom of long-term malnutrition.

In Kosovo and Albania 43,000 refugees and internally displaced people were counted as receiving food from the WFP, and renewed fighting in both areas is expected to swell their ranks in 1999. Agency personnel have also been diverted to administer the oil for food program in Iraq. Estimates have been made that as many as 5,000 children a day are dying in Iraq as a result of the US-dictated sanctions.

In sub-Saharan Africa, famine and hunger in 1998 were often the direct result of civil war. Thirty-seven African countries received food aid through WFP programs in 1998. Of the 13 countries identified by the UN as "exceptional food emergencies," in 11 of them civil strife, population displacement and insecurity (Rwanda) were identified as the sole or a major reason for the emergency.

Less than two weeks into the new year, the escalation of fighting in several areas in Africa has confirmed that the prediction of more of the same in 1999 was far from alarmist. New warnings have been issued that famine could strike in Somalia in 1999 at a level not seen since 300,000 starved to death there in 1991-92. Thousands of people have been displaced by the war between the Angolan government and UNITA in Angola.

In Sierra Leone hostilities in the capital were suspended last Thursday. Residents of Freetown were able to leave their houses in search of food for the first time in over week. The city itself has been devastated by fighting between rebels and the government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world--80 percent of the population of 5 million live the below the poverty line and average life expectancy is 34.4 years. Nevertheless the country is rich in minerals, including diamonds and bauxite. Last spring the British Labour government was accused of helping to organize the counter-coup that returned Kabbah to power at the behest of foreign investors.

A special appeal by the UN was issued this week concerning Sudan, where a 15-year war between the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), based in the South, and the Khartoum government has taken the lives of over one and a half million people in direct fighting or starvation from the loss of crops due to the fighting. The UN expects that 2.5 million people in the South will require \$180 million worth of aid in the coming year.

A cease-fire in parts of Bahr El Ghazal and Upper Nile, regions of the South where the famine was the greatest last year, was extended by SPLA leaders on Friday. The truce began last July and was extended again in October. However, it is not known what effect a reciprocal agreement to extend the truce by the Khartoum government, if granted, would have. Southern Sudan is now entering its long dry season, when fighting usually intensifies. Hostilities have continued in other areas of the country even while the cease-fire was in effect.

Far from the modern expression of ancient tribal wars, the civil wars in Africa are the result of conflict between the imperialist powers over control of the vast resources of the continent. The European countries, led by France and Belgium, former colonial masters of Africa, are chafing at the increased attention and intervention by the US in Africa.

This week the European Union threatened to withdraw aid from any African country involved in fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where forces from several countries in the area have sent troops in the past year. Broader conflicts over borders that have been in dispute since the African independence movement of the 1960s are now emerging, threatening to create even more victims among civilian populations.



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