

Africa starvation warning from UN Food and Agriculture Organisation

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While the Kosovo crisis receives daily media coverage, no attention is paid to the far bigger refugee crisis and famine faced by millions of people in Africa as a result of the civil wars and strife embroiling much of the continent.

A special report of the food prospects in Africa by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has warned that hundreds of thousands of Somalis are facing starvation. The outlook for war-torn Angola is "extremely bleak". Seventeen countries in sub-Saharan Africa face exceptional food emergencies.

The Red Cross and UN have received reports from Somalia that people are dying of hunger and that severe malnutrition is widespread. More than 1 million people are desperately short of food and 400,000 are threatened with starvation.

According to the FAO, this is the result of six consecutive poor harvests caused by adverse weather and the long-running civil strife. Economic life has all but come to a halt, particularly in the South, forcing large numbers of people to leave their homes in search of food and to escape from the fighting. Saudi Arabia's ban on livestock imports from the country, on account of outbreaks of disease, has aggravated the food crisis.

In Sudan, in spite of a record cereal harvest in 1998, some 2.36 million people in the conflict-torn South are in need of emergency food aid. The on-going war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has forced thousands of people on both sides to flee their homes, and has left 272,000 people in Ethiopia in desperate need of food aid. In Eritrea, emergency food aid is being provided to 268,000 people most affected by the war.

In rural Sierra Leone, in West Africa, the terrifying levels of violence led to large numbers of farming families fleeing their homes in search of safety elsewhere. There is little planting taking place now, in

what is the main sowing season. In the capital, Freetown, severe food and fuel shortages are reported, despite the return of traders and the reopening of banks. The continued insecurity is also affecting distribution of seeds and tools, and the provision of technical assistance. This is severely hampering attempts to get the agricultural economy going again. The country's survival will depend upon international food aid later on in the year.

In Guinea-Bissau, the resumption of fighting in the capital city in January has led to further population displacements.

In the Great Lakes region of East Africa, which includes Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi, "the food supply situation remains precarious", according to the FAO report. Efforts to increase food production are hamstrung by the fratricidal civil war in the Congo that is embroiling most of central and southern Africa.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, many rural people have abandoned their farms and homes. In the capital city, Kinshasa, a recent survey of families on the outskirts indicated that "90 percent of daily household expenditure goes to food". Renewed fighting in Brazzaville and in the Pool region in the South has caused more than 30,000 people to flee.

Harvests in Burundi and Rwanda have been cut by prolonged dry spells, and fighting in some areas continues to disrupt food production. What little is being produced does not find its way to market. Not surprisingly, malnutrition is widespread.

In Angola, the food outlook for 1999 is extremely bleak. Food production has fallen precipitously, following the resumption of fighting between government forces and the US-backed UNITA rebels last December, just after the beginning of the current

cropping season. Huge numbers of people have left the rural areas. Families have abandoned their farms to take refuge in government-held towns and cities, or even in neighbouring countries. Some reports say that the Angolan countryside is being systematically depopulated. The FAO has warned that the country will need massive food aid. But any relief assistance will be difficult and expensive because of the war and land mines. Many parts of the country can only be reached by air.

The number of sub-Saharan African countries on the FAO's exceptional food emergency list has risen from 13 to 17 since the end of 1998. In nearly all these countries, current or recent wars and civil strife are the root cause of the food emergency. This has disrupted agricultural production, and created a refugee crisis of epidemic proportions.

The FAO reports only those countries where starvation is already widespread. But last month, the retail price of bread in Zimbabwe reached \$12 a loaf. Flour millers and bakers had raised their prices in response to raging inflation and currency devaluations--in turn the result of the Mugabe government's IMF-imposed economic policies.

The cost of wheat in Zimbabwe has doubled since October, to as much as \$9000 a tonne, as subsidies have been lifted. Stocks are low, leading to fears that flour mills will shut. If flour millers and bakeries were forced to close, Zimbabwe would face a major food crisis because the country now has limited maize supplies left in stock. If consumers could no longer buy bread, the maize stocks would then come under pressure.

Uncertainty over wheat prices could push farmers not to plant as much as they could, increasing dependency on imports, with dire consequences for Zimbabwe's balance of payments, farm viability, employment and consumer prices. Yet Zimbabwe was once dubbed the "bread basket of Africa".

The escalation in the number of civil wars, and refugees now estimated at more than 6 million throughout Africa, has led to a massive increase in the amount of food and humanitarian aid needed. In 1997, the amount of aid required for Africa was US\$739 million, almost half the world's total. Only 54 percent of those needs were met. In 1998 the amount needed rose to US\$1.071 billion. In just the first three months

of 1999, US \$701 million was needed, of which only 18 percent has been, or is likely to be found.

Albert-Alain Peters, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Africa Director, warned that the crisis in Kosovo could see vital aid diverted from Africa's refugees. Donor countries would have to choose between the much publicised refugee problem in Kosovo and Africa's "forgotten crisis", he said. "The refugee situation in Africa is just as bad, if not worse, than that of Kosovo."

Peters said Africa had one of the largest refugee populations in the world. The northern African countries host some 2 million refugees. Some 190,000 refugees from the wars in the Congo and Angola are in Zambia. In the Great Lakes region, hundreds of thousands are on the move from country to country. West Africa had no refugees some 15 years ago, but now hosts hundreds of thousands of people who have fled Liberia and Sierra Leone. Guinea alone hosts about 700,000 refugees, nearly 10 percent of its population, Peters said. "In Kosovo they are receiving food, chocolates and cigarettes. In Africa they are living in the bush".

To cite but one example, thousands of scared refugees have just emerged from jungle hideouts in Sierra Leone after government-allied forces pushed rebels out of central Sierra Leone. They were emaciated, having lived for five months in the jungle, with little shelter on a diet of wild yams and cassava.



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