

# Famine spreads across southern Africa

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The famine in southern Africa threatens to become a major humanitarian disaster, with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) warning that more than five million people will need food aid in the near future. Officials based in the region say as many as 20 million people could be affected. WFP is already feeding 2.6 million in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The impact of flooding followed by drought, combined with deteriorating economic conditions and the highest rate of AIDS infection in the world, mean many more will be affected.

In Angola the situation in areas cut-off until recently by civil war conditions is particularly serious. The charity Medecins Sans Frontières reported finding a whole town of 18,000 people dying of hunger, with 4,000 graves dug in the last six months.

The UN expects that at least three million tonnes of food aid will be needed this year to combat famine in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and surrounding countries. So far the UN agencies have not mobilised in Angola and the Angolan government has not called for any international aid.

Malawi is facing its worst famine for more than 50 years, with more than 70 percent of the country's 11 million population affected. The government declared the country to be in a state of disaster in February. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, landlocked with poor transport facilities and most of the population living on subsistence farming. Maize, the staple diet, had such a bad harvest that farmers were forced to eat what little they had before it ripened and will soon run out completely. People are selling off household assets and livestock in order to survive, and are eating wild plants and grass seeds.

Whilst official figures state that several hundred people have died from hunger-related diseases, the real position, according to churches and charities, is likely to be as many as 10,000, with up to 100 people dying daily.

Malawi is also experiencing its worst ever cholera epidemic, exacerbated by the widespread malnutrition. It has already caused at least 1,000 deaths, reaching a peak in February and March with 40,000 reported cases.

In Zimbabwe the state media has announced that 7.8

million people, nearly half the population, will be in need of food aid. WFP estimates that Zimbabwe will have to import between 1.5 and 2 million tonnes of maize. President Robert Mugabe was forced to declare a state of disaster at the end of last month. With foreign investment and aid having virtually ceased, the economy is in a state of near collapse with inflation climbing to a record 113 percent. Finance Minister Simon Makoni said that \$30 million was needed immediately and a further \$200 million of food imports would be required to stave off famine, though aid agencies estimated more would be needed. Already deeply in debt, it is unlikely that Zimbabwe will find the necessary funds.

Zambia has been hit by floods in some parts of the country and drought in others and 1.2 million out of the 10 million population suffer from a lack of food. Hundreds are reported leaving the land and walking as far as 50km to border towns in hope of buying food.

Severe floods hit Mozambique in 2000 and surviving crops were eaten by plagues of insects, including locusts. A UN official reported seeing a man diving into crocodile-infested waters to gather water lily bulbs to feed his family, as there was no other food available.

In Lesotho, a tiny country surrounded by South Africa, 15 percent of the one million population face starvation. The prime minister formally declared the country to be suffering from serious famine.

Angola is in an exceptionally serious situation, according to the Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF) report. Areas previously inaccessible due to the war—nearly 90 percent of the country—are described by MSF as containing “grey zones”, where thousands of people are gathered in “a state of severe malnutrition and appalling health.” MSF counted more than 200 malnourished people out of 2,000 in the town of Damba, with daily mortality around seven per 10,000 people, seven times worse than the level defining an “emergency situation.” In five “evaluation missions” to previously cut-off towns, MSF found daily death rates of five per 10,000 people and up to half the population suffering malnutrition. It is still not known how many “high risk” sites like these exist in Angola, where people have subsisted without aid or commerce for the last three years.

Support from Western governments to deal with this emergency has been limited. It is reflected in the media coverage, with very few articles compared to the hundreds on the Zimbabwe elections and the demonisation of President Mugabe.

In March WFP appealed for \$69 million to buy food for the region. At the end of April, regional WFP director Judith Lewis reported funds pledged of just \$3 million. In the cases of Malawi and Zimbabwe especially, there appears to be a political calculation that regimes failing to meet Western demands will be dealt with accordingly.

The UN became aware of the developing emergency in Zimbabwe last year and launched an appeal for \$83.6 million in September 2001. So far only about a quarter of this money has come in. The Zimbabwe regime's land seizure programme has certainly disrupted agricultural production and made the famine worse—according to WFP maize production is 57 percent lower than last year and even 31 percent lower than the 1994/5 drought—but the Western powers are clearly using this to justify their refusal to aid a starving population. There is no evidence that the Zimbabwe regime is in anyway hindering the work of the UN and the various charities that are at present distributing food aid.

A further reason for withholding support to Zimbabwe may well be the consideration that desperate food shortages could be a lever to force a rapprochement between Mugabe and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition, or even lead to a situation justifying outside intervention to oust Mugabe. As a recent report from the International Institute of Strategic Studies put it: "Either humanitarian disaster or a further deterioration in security could prompt aggressive outside diplomatic, economic or even military intervention."

Malawi's government is also heavily criticized in the West for corruption and especially for selling off the country's 167,000 tonne emergency grain reserve last year. Apparently officials are unable to account for the money from the sale. In return the United States, Britain and the European Union have frozen at least \$75 million in aid—to a government that depends on aid for a large part of its income.

The food was sold under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, as it was costing more than \$3 million a year to store—money that could be used to pay off debt to commercial banks. IMF officials now claim they told the government not to sell off all the emergency food. Western pressure to "liberalise" the grain market—forcing up prices at least threefold—has seriously exacerbated the crisis.

This month the IMF refused to allow debt relief to the Malawi government—it owes \$2.5 billion and pays out 39 cents in debt services for every \$1 received in aid grants—demanding that money for emergency food should

come from budget cuts. There has been little response from international donors to the emergency. As a result the government was forced into borrowing a further \$35 million from foreign banks.

Pleas from the UN for \$4.2 million aid for Malawi have largely gone unheeded and the UN has had to take \$1.5 million from its own emergency reserves to buy food. Last week Malawi's Vice President, Justin Malewezi, repeated the request for international support, explaining that at least \$21 million was needed to avert a humanitarian disaster and only \$5 million has been received. Pledges have now been made by the US to give a mere \$5.4 million of food in June and July, some of it only on the basis of "food for work", and a further \$1.6 million has been pledged from Britain.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies launched an appeal for \$4 million to provide support to 450,000 AIDS sufferers hit by the famine in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The region has the highest AIDS rates in the world, with 20 percent of the population estimated to be HIV positive. AIDS has orphaned about three million children in the region and hundreds of thousands of families are now headed by children.

Whilst Western leaders claimed that they were going to tackle AIDS just one year ago by setting up the "Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria," it seems that little support is reaching sub-Saharan Africa. The fund needed to raise at least \$10 billion a year, according to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. In fact the total pledged since last year has yet to reach \$2 billion and only \$378 million has been dispersed so far to 40 programmes in 31 countries.



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