

Famine intensifies in southern Africa

Barry Mason, Chris Talbot
20 June 2002

A new international survey shows that 12.8 million people in southern Africa in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique face an immediate famine crisis. Reports coming from these separate countries suggest the figure is a conservative estimate.

The United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) carried out the survey. The WFP now feeds 4.6 million people across the region—a figure that has doubled over the last few weeks. It is launching an appeal for donor support, calling for of 1.2 million tonnes of emergency food aid immediately and estimating that 4 million tonnes will be needed over the next year.

A spokesman for Concern Worldwide, an umbrella group of NGOs involved in distributing food aid, said after making an assessment tour of Zimbabwe, “Only massive intervention now, with large scale delivery of food aid, will prevent catastrophe on the scale of the 1984 Ethiopia Famine, or Somalia in 1991-92.” On the situation in Malawi, the group warned, “If decisive action is not taken my fear is that many thousands of people will die.”

Malawi is the worst affected country, where more than 1,000 people have already died. Up to three million people face starvation with 485,000 tonnes of food aid needed immediately.

In Zimbabwe at least six million people—half the population—will need food aid and the shortfall in maize production is likely to reach 1.5 million tonnes. Already there are long queues for maize in Harare and Bulawayo.

Zambia’s government has just declared a national disaster. Four million people face starvation and the country could run out of food in July or August. Due to drought, there has been a total crop failure in the south of the country, following a 30 percent fall in maize production last year.

Throughout the region there have been two successive years of poor harvests caused by droughts and flooding. There has also been severe economic decline, due to the

implementation of IMF structural adjustment policies. In Zimbabwe, where the Zanu PF regime has resisted IMF policies with a move to national autarky, the economy has all but collapsed. Although Zimbabwe has some of the best agricultural land in the region, there has been disruption of large-scale white-owned farming due to the government’s land seizure programme, accompanied by a failure to provide small farmers with investment and infrastructure. Experts are also concerned that El Niño, the warming of part of the Pacific Ocean that causes severe weather disturbances, could return this year and affect future crops.

All of the countries affected have the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world, with sometimes up to a quarter of the population infected. This seriously weakens the population’s resistance to other diseases and makes them unable to withstand the effects of famine.

The response from Western governments has been one of indifference coupled with political attacks on the African regimes concerned. These not only seek to magnify local responsibility for the disaster as opposed to that of the US and European governments, but also insist on further “market liberalisation”, that is, more of the policies that are largely responsible for this famine having a much more serious impact compared to a similar famine ten years ago.

Speaking to the US House of Representatives International Relations Committee, Andrew Natsios of USAID claimed that the international community could “prevent a famine, not respond to one” and referred complacently to present conditions as “pre-famine indicators.” Natsios turned down Democrat proposals for \$200 million in emergency funds. Democrat Tom Lantos was concerned lest “television images of mass graves brimming with corpses expose our policy failures”. Natsios replied, “We believe we have sufficient food to deal with both the emergency here and other emergencies in the world.”

Natsios claimed that US supplies represented 75 percent of the WFP’s operations. The US committed 132,710

tonnes of food aid, valued at \$68.4 million. Yet this is little more than a tenth of that required immediately and Natsios had to admit that WFP's current operations face a 56 percent shortfall. The ports and transport facilities in the region are also presenting problems to the WFP and NGO aid agencies. Due to privatisations they now have lower capacity than they did in the famine of the early 1990s.

In press reports Natsios denounced President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe as "a tyrant directly responsible" for the food shortages. To the House Committee he claimed that the food deficit was a result of Zimbabwe's refusal to "liberalise" economic policies and proposed that Western governments impose "policies that allow the private sector to close this deficit", suggesting that food prices would then fall.

The indifferent attitude of Western governments to the African famine was put on display at the United Nations World Food Summit in Rome last week. Spain and Italy were the only Western countries to send leaders to the conference—Italy because they were the hosts and Spain holding the current EU presidency. The conference was closed two hours early so that President Berlusconi could watch Italy play in the Soccer World Cup. Having demonstrated the importance they attach to world famine by the low-ranking delegations, Western governments used the conference to propagate their own agenda. The European Union's Aid Commissioner Poul Nielson declared Mugabe's presence at the conference to be "distasteful". The conference's call for more money was "off the point", he claimed. Eighty percent of those starving in the world lived in conflict zones, so "throwing vast quantities of cash at the problem was pointless." Current food subsidies were "unsustainable" and would be cut back over time.

Apart from ritual denunciations of Mugabe, the main concern of the US officials was to get the conference to formally endorse biotechnology as a way of increasing agricultural productivity. There was no mention of organic farming in the conference declaration. The US had clearly arm-twisted the conference into supporting its biotech corporations. Support for genetically modified food was clearly directed against the EU's ban on such products. In his report to the House International Relations Committee, Natsios said that unless Zimbabwe stopped following the EU example of banning genetically modified corn, "it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the US government to respond to the extensive food requirements that have been identified."

Any serious consideration of the problems facing Southern Africa has to take into account the impact of IMF policies in the region. Even the turn to economic nationalism and repression of opposition in Zimbabwe can only be understood as a desperate response to pressures from the West to cut state spending and privatise markets. In a detailed analysis of the development of the famine in Malawi, ActionAid, a UK-based development agency, cites the IMF instruction to the Malawian government to sell off its grain reserves to repay debts—allowing the private traders who bought up the grain to profiteer after hoarding it until prices rose in the famine.

Whilst the IMF claims it told the government not to sell all the reserve, the result was that donors did not respond to the food crisis even as hundreds of people were dying. They were "obsessed with finding out what happened to the Strategic Grain Reserve: if it was still in-country it could be released on to the market; if politicians had profiteered they should own up."

More fundamental is the comparison with 1991. At that time Malawi's agricultural marketing parastatal had depots even in the most remote areas and could sell food at affordable prices to peasants in rural areas to prevent the onset of famine. Malawi has now followed the IMF prescription to "liberalise" its food market. As the report puts it, "rigid and prescriptive IMF and donor-led economic policies" is responsible for the food shortage. Instead of subsidised food being available to a mainly rural population, food prices rose ten-fold throughout the latter part of 2001, putting them well beyond the reach of an already poor population.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact