

United Nations ignores worsening famine in Southern Africa

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As world leaders attended the United Nations General Assembly last week, new figures were released showing the deepening famine facing Southern Africa. James Morris, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Humanitarian Needs, explained, "the humanitarian crisis is not only devastatingly real, it is also worsening faster than was originally projected."

Morris was reporting back after a two-week investigative tour of the affected countries—Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique—coordinated by the Southern African Development Community (SADC). An estimated 14.4 million people are now threatened by famine, compared to the 12.8 million reported in the previous survey last May. "This crisis must be an absolute top priority for the international community," Morris appealed. It was the biggest humanitarian regional crisis in the world today.

In mid-July the UN appealed for \$507 million in food aid. It has received only 36 percent of this amount and had pledges for another 30 percent. There is a shortfall of up to a million metric tons. On top of this the UN has asked for \$105 million in related aid for agriculture and healthcare. Many farmers in the region have no seeds, tools or fertiliser and planting for next year's harvest should take place within the next month.

The extra numbers are at risk mainly as a result of shortage of supplies of maize, the staple diet in the region. Because of drought maize production fell sharply in the countries affected. Imports of food to relieve this situation, both commercial and humanitarian aid, have been lower than expected causing prices to increase sharply—beyond the reach of the vast majority.

Morris explained that the famine is greatly exacerbated by the AIDS pandemic across the region: "This is a very, very different crisis than anything we've seen before. HIV/AIDS is laying siege to entire communities, decimating the workforce and putting an even heavier strain on already overburdened and weak healthcare systems." Adult AIDS rates in the countries affected range from 12 to 36 percent.

HIV/AIDS impact on the famine is also stressed by the

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Their secretary, Didier Cherpitel, said that millions of lives in the region were hanging by a thread and 300,000 people could be dead by the year's end. "The pandemic first affects the most productive generation [those aged 15 to 49], leaving behind the elderly and children, unlike many other diseases that hit the most infirm first," he said. "The elderly who can no longer till the parched fields are forced to care for malnourished, ill children. Pre-teen children become heads of households, prone to exploitation in a desperate bid to care for their siblings. Households affected can afford only a bare minimum of food, thus as income declines, supplies become less stable."

The SADC/UN give a break down of the countries affected:

* In Zimbabwe 6.5 million people, half the population, are in need of emergency food aid. Nearly half a million metric tonnes of cereal food aid is needed over the next six months. It is the worst affected country in the region. The situation has been worsened by erratic rainfall, which resulted in a poor harvest in 2000/2001.

* Malawi has been severely hit by famine and hundreds have already died. Over three million people, a third of the population, are in need of emergency food aid and will require a quarter of a million metric tonnes of cereal food aid between now and March next year. Severe weather has added to the problems. Half the country has been hit by floods and a quarter has suffered drought.

* A quarter of Zambia's population, around three million people, will need emergency food aid in the next six months. Drought led to crop failure in the south and parts of eastern Zambia have also been affected. The production of maize fell by around a third in the year 2000/2001 and the country will have a shortfall of more than 600,000 metric tonnes.

* A million people are affected in Lesotho and Swaziland, representing about a quarter of each country's population. In Lesotho this year's harvest is less than half the normal amount. In Swaziland two thirds of the population are below the poverty line, yet face sharply rising prices for maize and

wheat.

* In Mozambique over half a million people are affected, around three percent of the population. The situation has been compounded by severe weather, with drought in the north and floods in the south and central areas.

What is clear from SADC reports is that although bad weather has caused some sharp falls in maize production, the underlying cause of the famine is economic. Compared to the five-year average, maize production over the whole of Southern Africa was only down by seven percent. In South Africa, which produces nearly half the region's total, production was actually up by five percent, and production in Mozambique and Tanzania increased by 12 percent in each case. But the countries most seriously affected are too impoverished to import food or to keep adequate emergency reserves.

This economic cause of the famine was taken up by the charity Oxfam, in a paper produced for last month's World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg. Oxfam asks: "[W]hy, after years of World Bank and IMF designed agricultural sector reforms, do Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique face chronic food insecurity?" Oxfam is not opposed to capitalist markets but they have to accept that free market policies have wrecked the economies of these countries. "In the agricultural sector, by completely dismantling the state's role over such a short period, the reforms succeeded only in 'curing the patient by killing them.'"

By removing state subsidies food prices have risen massively—for example, the price of maize rose by 400 percent between October 2001 and March 2002 in Malawi. Prices of farm inputs have also risen. In Malawi the cost of one bag of fertiliser has risen by 250 percent since 1990. Whereas the state provided a rural market for small farmers with no access to transport, the private sector has not taken over this role because it is not profitable—pushing small farms out of the market. Food reserves, which are costly to maintain, have been closed down completely in Mozambique and run down in Malawi and Zambia under World Bank and IMF liberalisation measures.

Zimbabwe has been especially singled out by Britain and the United States, who have blamed the Mugabe regime for the country's food crisis. In reality the Zimbabwe government is little more corrupt or despotic than the others in the region. It would seem from the Oxfam assessment that in not going as far with market liberalisation as the other countries—it is this that offends the Western powers—Zimbabwe could have saved its population from the worst effects of the famine. That this has not happened is due to the collapse of the economy as investors have pulled out.

Mugabe's land reforms—seizing some of the large white-owned commercial farms—have undoubtedly contributed to the economic decline as they produce up to a third of Zimbabwe's exports. But contrary to Western media reports, the farm seizures have not contributed directly to the food shortages. Even the *Zimbabwe Daily News*, an opposition newspaper persecuted by the government, states in its editorial August 27, "the bulk of food eaten by the population is produced by small-scale farmers with the large-scale farmers cultivating mainly cash crops for export."

Despite the extreme severity of the catastrophe facing Southern Africa, the UN General Assembly, in the day of discussion set aside for African affairs, did not give it any consideration. The debate centred entirely around the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a plan put forward by African leaders to increase economic growth by attracting more investment. NEPAD offers all the measures demanded by the west—market access and free market economies, "transparency and accountability", elimination of corruption, etc. It contains "peer review" proposals that the Western powers have insisted on. African leaders are required to insist that all African countries accept the very free market measures that have produced the present economic disaster.

The point was made forcefully by US Secretary of State Colin Powell. "Countries that fail to live up to NEPAD's commitments will suffer," he said. Making clear that famine is regarded as punishment for governments that fail to come into line, Powell stated that: "Zimbabwe's economic decline is a warning of ignoring the linkage between good policies and human development."

NEPAD was endorsed by all the Western powers but they have only volunteered to make \$6 billion in annual investments beginning in 2006, compared to the \$64 billion requested. Most of these investments are tied to specific proposals, such as the selling off of water and other utilities to western companies.



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