

Large parts of Africa face chronic food shortages

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As the news of starving people in Niger drops from the headlines, warnings of food shortages in many parts of Africa have been issued by the US Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and a number of aid agencies.

In Niger itself the eventual response of Western governments to the shocking media coverage has seen airlifts of emergency food aid and free distribution of food. But the same powers are ignoring warnings that many other countries, and Niger itself in the longer term, are facing a food crisis.

In Niger the WFP say that all the 2.65 million people affected will begin to receive food from its organisation, the Niger government and NGOs over the next few weeks. But the WFP is concerned that far more financial support will be needed next month to get through to the harvest in October. Its appeal for \$US57.6 million has a current shortfall of \$US32.8 million.

Oxfam reported that nomads in Niger such as the Tuareg and Fulani, who make up about 20 percent of Niger's 12.9 million population, are facing particular difficulties. Up to 70 percent of their livestock has died as the result of the early end of last year's rainy season, a plague of locusts, and above all extreme poverty. Oxfam's regional director explained, "To these people, losing your animals is like losing your life savings. Without their animals they have no means of survival."

Dr Milton Tectonidis of the medical relief charity, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has just returned from Niger and was interviewed on the MSF website. When asked about his mission to Niger, he said, "Those who say that this is just a situation like past years are just wrong. There is a real food shortage in many households and a lot of catastrophic cases arriving at our centres."

While Niger is the worst affected country in the Sahel region, other countries continue to face a crisis. In neighbouring Mali, WFP representatives are warning of

the danger of famine by the end of the month. A WFP food appeal so far has a 63 percent shortfall. The nomads who live in the north of the country are most affected. According to the BBC, warehouses in Timbuktu have only 447 tonnes of millet but need 1,000 tonnes to meet current needs.

If the rains fail and the aid is not forthcoming then famine is a real possibility. Yusuf Gitay, a retired school teacher, who lived through the famine in 1973 in which thousands died, told the BBC that this year could be the worst since then. The government says that over a million people face food shortages—around eight percent of the population.

In Mauritania the WFP states that up to 600,000 people were affected by locust infestations and drought, and there is currently a 58 percent shortfall in donations. Although not as seriously affected as Niger, Mali and Mauritania, about 500,000 people in Burkina Faso were affected by crop losses in 2004 and the WFP has been stepping up assistance to vulnerable groups.

Commenting on the situation in West Africa, Oxfam's Regional Director said, "Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Burkina Faso have been forgotten by the rest of the world and this neglect has led directly to the current crisis. It is appalling that many rich governments only remember these countries when they see children there dying of hunger on their TV screens."

In its latest report, FEWS cited 12 African countries with more than 20 million people receiving food aid. Six of these are listed as "urgent action required"—Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Niger, Somalia and Zimbabwe.

Southern Africa also faces a particularly serious food crisis in a few months time. The WFP estimates that as many as 10.7 million people in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe will need assistance by the 2006 lean season. Together with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), it

conducted a survey of food and crops in Southern Africa and concluded that not enough food was being grown for domestic consumption. Even with large imports of commercial supplies, food shortages would persist until the harvest in May 2006.

An updated FAO report on Malawi in August showed over four million people, a third of the population, as not having sufficient food. This year's maize harvest, the staple crop, of 1.3 million tonnes was down 26 percent on last year's.

FAO emergency coordinator in Malawi, Tesfai Ghermazien, explained: "The rains failed during the critical period from late January to end of February when the maize crop was pollinating and forming cobs. The dry spell also coincided with cassava and sweet potato planting in some areas... The impacts of the failed harvest won't be felt fully until the lean season sets in between October and April. We need urgent assistance from the donor community to prevent a further escalation of the crisis and to avert widespread hunger and malnutrition, especially among children under the age of five."

In Zimbabwe, according to the WFP, one million are currently in desperate need of food aid, but this figure is likely to increase to 4.3 million in the next few months. The crisis is compounded by the actions of the Mugabe regime which has made up to 700,000 people homeless and without food in a "slum clearance programme".

In a report published this month, the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute attempted to forecast the long-term food security status for Africa, up to the year 2025. It pointed out that the number of malnourished people on the continent has more than doubled since 1970. In relation to food security, it commented, "the situation in Africa is stagnant or worsening. More than 200 million Africans now suffer from malnutrition."

The report outlined the factors leading to food insecurity, one of which is the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The FAO estimated that by 2020 the epidemic will have killed 20 percent of those working in agriculture in Southern Africa.

The document also explained that the soil in Africa is losing fertility, with 72 percent of arable land and 31 percent of pastureland being classified as degraded. "Nutrient levels have declined over the past 30 years, resulting in low levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium," it stated.

Poverty is a major factor, with nearly 47 percent of the continent's population being classed as poor in 2001, or

living on less than a \$US1 a day.

Another significant factor is the state of the infrastructure—roads, power and communications. "Sub-Saharan Africa inherited a highly dispersed and unevenly distributed infrastructure from its colonial past," the report stated.

Other factors affecting food insecurity include the decline in agricultural research on the continent and lack of irrigation. Agriculture in Africa is rain-fed, and when those rains fail so do the crops, exacerbating food insecurity. Climate change would appear to be making the probability of poor rains more likely in the future.

The report presented three possible scenarios for the future: "business as usual", "pessimistic" and "vision". It admitted that the "pessimistic" scenario, which would result in more than 60 million malnourished children by the year 2025, is the more plausible one.

The "vision" scenario is based on the interventions necessary to reach the UN Millennium Development Goal target of cutting the proportion of people suffering from hunger in half by 2015. According to the report, it would require a \$95.4 billion investment in roads, \$82.3 billion in education, \$49.1 billion in clean water, \$48.7 billion in irrigation and \$27.8 billion in agricultural research.

Such an investment is easily within the capabilities of Western governments. But the criminally slow reaction to the Niger crisis, and the continuing refusal to heed the warnings from the aid agencies of a potentially much wider disaster, highlight the brutal reality that under capitalism no such response will be forthcoming.



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