

# Half of the Zimbabwe population faces starvation

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Aid charities and the United Nations estimate that 5 million people in Zimbabwe, half the population, face starvation.

A USAID Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) alert issued September 24 warned of insufficient cereal imports. It stated, "Zimbabwe could face a critical shortage or exhaustion of cereals as early as the first week of November... The current in-country supply of agricultural inputs for the upcoming planting season is insufficient... Late planting could aggravate the impact of forecast below-normal rainfall in the second half of the season (January-March 2009) in the country's main crop producing regions, increasing the potential for a poor harvest and the continued need for imports in 2009."

A Christian Aid press release on October 14 emphasised the stark social conditions facing millions in Zimbabwe. The dire statistics indicate that "over 85 percent of the population is unemployed, 90 percent are living on less than £1 a day and 15 percent of adults are living with HIV with some 3,500 dying every week of related diseases... (Zimbabwe) has the lowest life expectancy in the world: 34 years for men and 32 years for women."

Speaking to the BBC News web site at the beginning of October, John Holmes, the United Nations humanitarian chief, described the situation as grave and deteriorating:

"Planting season for the next harvest starts in five or six weeks' time, at least for maize, and there is a massive shortage of seeds and fertilizers in the country because of the economic situation..."

"We're looking to see whether we can accelerate even at this late stage and get some of those seeds and fertilizers and other imports into the hands of small

farmers."

An October 17 *Africa Confidential* newsletter quoted a senior UN World Food Programme (WFP) official describing the situation as "very, very bad," noting that the next harvest was six months away. *Africa Confidential* continued, "The WFP reckons that 28 percent of children under five are malnourished and vulnerable to disease. Many rural families get one meal a day—typically sadza, maize-meal with no protein... The hungriest fill their stomachs with umtopi, baobab (tree) roots pounded into a paste."

The article noted research by Professor Ian Scoones of Sussex University who showed that whilst it is small farmers on communal land who provide most of the food in rural areas, their productivity has been greatly reduced following several successive droughts and their inability to afford fertiliser, etc., to improve their land.

An October 24 article in the *Times* of London reported on the eastern province of Manicaland. The reporter said she found "a country whose reserves of food are exhausted and where the diseases of hunger—kwashiorkor, marasmus and pellagra—are appearing to a degree never seen in the country before."

The *Times* described emaciated children dying in hospital. Greg Powell, chairman of the Zimbabwe Child Protection Society, said, "In the 32 years I have worked in Zimbabwe as a paediatrician I have never known a more serious situation. We can predict an exponential increase in cases of kwashiorkor and malnutrition over the next six months."

Geoff Foster, a paediatrician at Mutare hospital, said, "Malnutrition is a silent emergency that affects young children... There is a famine situation prevailing and it is desperate."

The threat of a cholera epidemic is also mounting. A UN IRIN news report carried by Reuters on October 20

stated there have been 120 deaths so far due to cholera, with most being in the Mashonaland Central province. The report blamed the collapse of health and municipal services, lack of potable water and no rubbish collection or proper sanitation system. People had to resort to digging shallow wells to obtain water, but these often became polluted by sewerage spills.

The report added: "The state-owned Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) has pumped raw sewerage into Lake Chivero, one of the reservoirs providing Harare with water; residents with access to piped water often have to contend with a smelly greenish discharge from their taps."

An Inter Press Service article carried on AllAfrica.com October 16 quoted a statement released by the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA). It said: "The water and sewer management problems have seen some residential areas going for years, months and weeks without water and unattended sewer bursts respectively. The shortage of water dictates that residents fetch water from unprotected sources, thus diseases like cholera breed easily. CHRA has so far received countless cases of cholera and diarrhoea."

A US GMA television news report of October 30 reported one person in Harare has died from cholera and 20 other people had succumbed to the disease. It quoted one resident of Eastern Harare who said that his neighbourhood had been without piped water for a year and described how the smell and smoke from the burning of uncollected rubbish was making people ill. People had to resort to digging their own wells, but he was concerned that "When the rains come all the filth will flow into our well."

The dire social and economic situation is being exacerbated by the ongoing deadlock over the power-sharing agreement between President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change. Mugabe is intent on controlling the important ministries, thus sidelining the MDC. The talks have been brokered by Thabo Mbeki, but his loss of the South African presidency has rendered him politically impotent.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has called for a larger regional summit to try to reach a deal.



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