

More than one billion to go hungry in 2009

Hiram Lee
2 April 2009

In a report delivered before the United Nations' Food Policy conference in Bangkok Thailand on Monday, Jacques Diouf, the director general of the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) warned that more than one billion people across the world were now likely to go undernourished in 2009. That number is up from the 963 million, or roughly 1 in 7 people, projected by the FAO for 2008.

Diouf pointed out that while prices for essential agricultural commodities such as rice, corn and wheat have fallen from the destructive heights they reached in 2008, they remain approximately 30 percent higher than 2005 rates. Diouf told the *Financial Times* in an interview last week, "The food crisis is not over."

Current prices are already placing an enormous burden on poor and working class people throughout the world. However, Diouf further warned that prices could soar once again to the highs recorded between 2007 and 2008 due to the lack of credit currently available to farmers, which has affected their production and expansion capabilities.

During 2007-2008 the price of corn rose 31 percent, rice 74 percent, soybeans 87 percent and wheat 130 percent. The inability of masses of people to afford basic food necessities under these conditions led to global unrest, with food riots breaking out in no less than 30 countries.

The FAO has documented at length a number of the ongoing emergencies in food security. In the most recent update on food emergencies from February, the FAO reports that 32 countries around the world are in a state of immediate crisis and food insecurity, requiring external assistance. The FAO has placed particular emphasis on the Gaza Strip, devastated by recent Israeli aggression, as well as Kenya, Somalia and Zimbabwe, where "the food security situation is precarious following drought-reduced crops, civil disturbance

and/or economic crisis."

The report notes, "More than 18 million people face serious food insecurity due either to conflict, unrest, or adverse weather or a combined effect" in Eastern Africa. In Kenya, the FAO reports, millions are faced with food insecurity, and the government "has declared a state of National Disaster and indicated that about 10 million people are highly food insecure including 3.2 million drought-affected people."

"In Eritrea, [in Northeastern Africa]," the report states, "cereal prices remain high affecting the food security of large sections of the population" while across its Western border in southern Sudan, "despite an overall improvement in the supply of cereals, inadequate transport and marketing systems will prevent any significant movements from surplus to deficit areas."

A report released by the International Trade Union Federation in March titled *A Recipe for Hunger: How the World is Failing on Food*, attempts to paint a broader picture of the crisis while echoing predictions made by Diouf and the FAO: "In Africa the poorest are hit the hardest. 160 million people are trying to survive on an income of less than half a dollar a day. Most of those households are net buyers of food, not producers. The result is that soaring food prices hit household budgets of the poor in the developing countries. An impact felt instantly because an average of 50 to 70 percent of their budget is spent on food, leaving no room for a well-balanced, highly nutritional diet."

The report goes on to say that "not since the 1970s and the international oil crisis have food prices across the globe been this elevated. ... The shock of high prices began already in 2006, and agricultural commodity prices continued to rise until mid-2008. Medium-term projections from FAO indicate that food prices in 2009 may fall but will still remain well above their pre-2004 level in the coming years."

Having made a number of dire predictions regarding world hunger, Diouf's proposed solution for confronting the crisis is to appeal to the leaders of the G20 countries for funds. "The first and foremost important element," says Diouf, "is the need to invest in agricultural production, and this would require \$30 billion a year."

The proposed solution to the problem presented by Diouf, the FAO and similar agencies entrusted with the monitoring of food emergencies, doesn't approach the heart of the problem. If \$30 billion per year or more is required to save agricultural production from a state of crisis, one must ask, under whose control and in whose interests those investments are to be made. To leave the food supplies and their distribution to the world's population in the hands of the G20 leaders and the ruling elites of the nation states they represent, only leads the food crisis into continued chaos.

The already vulnerable and anarchic state of worldwide food production was exploded by the credit crisis and the rampant speculation in food commodities that came as credit bubbles burst, but the root cause of widespread food insecurity is not the current crisis but the very nature of the capitalist system itself, from which the crisis has emerged.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact