

Sudan erupts as millions in Africa go hungry due to Ukraine war and sanctions on Russia

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Thousands of workers and students took to the streets in cities across Sudan in protest at rocketing food and fuel prices. Food prices are 100 to 200 percent higher than they were a year ago and inflation stands at 250 percent.

In the capital Khartoum last week, the protesters were met with tear gas and stun grenades as they came within 200 metres of the presidential palace.

The mass protests follow the sharp dive in the value of the Sudanese pound in the last month, as the military junta ended its fixed currency policy, and take place alongside ongoing strikes by teachers and railway workers in Atbara over their abysmally low salaries.

According to the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP), nearly half of Sudan's 44 million people will face hunger this year as a result of the military's ouster of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok last October (prompting international financial institutions to suspend billions of dollars in crucial budget aid), the war in Ukraine and sanctions imposed on Russia.

The WFP says that about 20 million people are likely to be at "emergency" or "crisis" levels of "acute food insecurity," double 2021's figure. The situation has worsened dramatically due to soaring global grain prices, the shortage of foreign currency and drought in some parts of the country, fueling the escalating protest movement demanding an end to military rule.

Like many countries in Africa, Sudan sourced about 35 percent of its wheat imports in 2021 from Russia and Ukraine and now must find an alternative supplier demanding far higher prices. Last year Russia and Ukraine accounted for nearly one third of the world's grain exports, one fifth of its corn trade and almost 80 percent of sunflower oil production. According to the US Department of Agriculture, world wheat supplies

will tighten, with exports from Russia and Ukraine likely to be 7 million tonnes smaller than expected before the war.

Following the US/NATO-provoked war, exports from Russia and Ukraine have virtually ground to a halt because of sanctions imposed by Washington and the European powers on Russia's banks, shipping and airlines and Ukraine's ban on the exports of grain and other food products to prevent a domestic humanitarian crisis. The northern Black Sea ports, where some of the most destructive fighting is taking place and through which most of Russia and Ukraine's grain exports are shipped, have closed, while flight bans are causing cargo planes to divert around Russian airspace. This has exacerbated already-rising food prices due to pandemic-related supply chain problems and deepened poverty.

The northern Black Sea area exports at least 12 percent of the world's traded food calories, while 45 percent of Ukraine's exports—Ukraine has one-third of the world's most fertile soil—are agricultural-related. As some of Ukraine's exports are used for animal feed, the export ban and disruptions are likely to impact livestock. Farmers fleeing the fighting and the war's destruction of infrastructure and equipment threaten April's planting season.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the price of wheat increased 80 percent between April 2020 and December 2021 as the pandemic took hold, sending food prices to their highest levels since the 1970s. Wheat prices have jumped 37 percent and corn 21 percent so far in 2022. Wheat futures are 80 percent higher than six months ago, and corn is up 58 percent.

Twenty-three of Africa's 54 countries depend on Russia and Ukraine for more than half the imports of one of their staple goods. Some countries are even more

reliant: Sudan, Egypt, Tanzania, Eritrea and Benin import 80 percent of their wheat and Algeria, Sudan and Tunisia more than 95 percent of sunflower oil from Russia and Ukraine. They too are seeing higher prices across the board, exacerbating hunger under conditions where most African elites provide no social safety net.

The cost of living will soar, particularly in countries that import most of their food and where the economic effects of COVID-19 hit hardest: Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda and Egypt. This is likely to double the number of people facing hunger in Africa, expected to reach more than 500 million of Africa's 1.2 billion people.

The dangers are particularly acute in Egypt, the world's largest buyer of wheat and the largest importer of wheat from Russia and Ukraine accounting for 80 percent of total imports. Around 30 million of Egypt's 104 million people live on less than \$1.50 a day and more than 70 million depend on government-subsidized imports for their bread and vegetable oil.

The government has banned the export of wheat, flour, and other staples, which will precipitate a sharp increase in prices and impact countries such as Yemen, already facing the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. Last year, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi announced he would raise subsidised bread prices. With Egypt's bread subsidies already costing \$3.2 billion a year, the Finance Ministry estimates it will have to budget an additional \$763 million in 2021-22.

Last July, the government reduced subsidies for sunflower and soybean oil by 20 percent, and unblended vegetable oil by 23.5 percent. This week, Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouly set the price of unsubsidized bread at 11.5 Egyptian pounds, up 25 percent, as the currency fell by 14 percent against the dollar following the war in Ukraine.

Libya, reliant on Ukraine for over 40 percent of its wheat imports, saw the price of wheat and flour rise by up to 30 percent. According to the WFP, even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 12 percent of Libyans, 511,000 people, would need food assistance in 2022. There are also 635,051 migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in Libya, one quarter of whom are considered moderately or severely food insecure. These terrible figures testify to the devastation caused by the 2011 NATO war against what was a middle-income country.

South Sudan, torn apart by civil war and conflicts

between rival cliques over control of the country's oil resources since independence in 2011, faces starvation with 8.9 million of the country's 12 million people—including 680,000 people affected by floods since May 2021—expected to face hunger in the coming dry season.

In Ethiopia, fighting in and around Tigray province in the north has displaced more than 2 million people. Most of the remaining four million Tigrayans do not have enough food and are surviving by reducing meals, selling crops to pay debts or begging. There are 454,000 malnourished children, more than a quarter severely, and 120,000 malnourished pregnant or lactating women. The situation has been made worse by the UN's inability to get emergency food supplies into Tigray since mid-December.

According to the WFP, 44 million people worldwide are on the brink of famine and another 232 million are only one step behind. The WFP has been badly hit as it gets half of the wheat it distributes in humanitarian crises from Ukraine. It must turn to other suppliers at a higher cost amid massively increased demand from countries torn apart by US-led or provoked wars and conflicts such as Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan, even as its funds from the advanced countries collapse as resources are diverted to Ukraine.

The world's leaders and analysts know that the expanding hunger will stoke social instability, migration and political unrest, just as the rising cost of living precipitated the Arab Spring in 2011. Last year, there were five coups in West Africa. Only 22 percent of the continent's 1.2 billion people have been vaccinated against COVID-19, while \$100 billion in aid to deal with the pandemic promised by the advanced countries has yet to be delivered. Around 20 countries are massively in debt and close to defaulting on international loans.



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