

US/NATO-provoked war in Ukraine creates food crisis in Africa

Jean Shaoul
24 May 2022

The war in Ukraine deliberately provoked by United States and its NATO partners, together with sanctions on Russia, have triggered the biggest rise in global commodity prices in more than 50 years.

The United Nations has warned that the war risks tipping 1.7 billion people, one-fifth of the world's population, into poverty, destitution and hunger—a horrifying scenario the imperialist powers are utilising to step up their warmongering in the Black Sea.

Nowhere is this threat more acute than in Africa.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's food price index, a gauge of food prices around the world, hit an all-time high in March, with food now costing 42 percent more than in 2014-2016. This comes at a time when food insecurity is already rising following the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the world's biggest food crisis since World War II. According to the latest estimates from the State of Food Security and Nutrition around the World, the number of people facing food insufficiency has reached 811 million, up 161 million people in 2019, meaning around one in 10 of the world's people went to bed hungry.

Africa has suffered more than any other continent. A total of 282 million people or 21 percent of Africans suffered from hunger in 2020, up 46 million on the previous year. Households in sub-Saharan Africa spend 40 percent of their incomes on food, a much higher proportion than those living in the advanced countries who spend 17 percent, according to the *Financial Times* based on figures from the International Monetary Fund. The African Development Bank puts this figure at 65 percent.

The joint impacts of the pandemic, unemployment, loss of earnings and the lack of social protection have pushed people into long-term poverty and destitution. Today, one in three Africans—422 million people—live

below the global poverty line, defined as living on less than \$1 per day.

Exports from Ukraine and Russia are at a virtual standstill, where according to UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres there are “nearly 25 million tons of grain that could be exported but that cannot leave the country [Ukraine].” 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 lower than expected before the war.

According to the African Development Bank, wheat imports make up 90 percent of Africa's \$4 billion trade with Russia and almost half of its \$4.5 billion trade with Ukraine. 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 are seeing higher prices across the board, under conditions where most African elites provide no social safety net.

The food crisis has been intensified by the multiyear droughts in the Horn, East Africa and the Sahel, locust swarms in East Africa, wars and conflicts, climate-induced floods and food protectionism, while the rampant corruption and economic mismanagement by the continent's kleptocrats have added to the suffering.

David Beasley, Executive Director of the UN's World Food programme (WFP), warned recently of the terrible situation in the Sahel, saying, “Around 11 million people in the Sahel area don't know where their

next meal is coming from. If they do not get the help they need now, we are talking about starvation, migration and destabilization.”

The UN is warning that 18 million people in the Sahel face food insecurity in the next three months. The worst affected—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger—are facing “alarming levels” with nearly 1.7 million people facing emergency levels of food shortages. This takes place as the European powers send troops to suppress the impoverished masses in the region and prevent them from fleeing to Europe.

Conflicts, wars and climate-induced droughts have hit the Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. The Horn of Africa/East Africa is facing its worst drought in 40 years, with three consecutive rainy seasons bringing little rain. When it did rain as in 2019, it was torrential, affecting some 3.4 million people and bringing a swarm of locusts that devoured crops. Temperatures have soared to record highs, resulting in the deaths of three million livestock across southern Ethiopia and the arid and semi-arid regions of Kenya since mid-2021. The UN has warned that up to 20 million people in the Horn of Africa could go hungry this year.

The cost of fertilizers has risen beyond what most farmers can afford, threatening next year’s harvest. Russia produces around 18 percent of the world’s potash market, 20 percent of ammonia exports and 15 percent of urea. In Ethiopia, amid the war ongoing since November 2020 in the northern Tigray region, the price of fertilizer has shot up 200 percent and food inflation has reached 43 percent. In neighbouring Kenya, drought had already caused a 70 percent slump in crop production even before the war in Ukraine, leaving more than 3 million people facing acute hunger. In Somalia, if no rain has fallen by the end of this month, around 6 million people—38 percent of the population—face extreme food insecurity.

Just as people’s needs are escalating, the aid agencies are struggling to find resources. The WFP requires US\$18.9 billion to reach 137 million people in 2022, but its funding gap is bigger than ever. The war is pushing up its costs by \$71 million as rising food, fuel and shipping costs reach \$850 million for the year. As a result, there will be four million less people reached by the programme. The WFP will have to cut rations in order to reach more people. The UN’s Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that aid groups had launched appeals earlier this year seeking \$3.8 billion in aid for the Sahel, but had only received 12 percent of its target.

Many of the world’s largest donors have diverted resources to Ukraine. The UK announced £220 million in humanitarian and development aid for Ukraine as part of its effort to support the US/NATO proxy war. In November 2020, Britain already cut its overall aid budget from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of GDP leading to a halving of the UK’s direct humanitarian aid to foreign countries last year, from £1.53 billion in 2020 to just £744 million.

A further factor exacerbating Africa’s food crisis is food protectionism as 23 countries clamp down on the export of food staples or impose restrictions such as taxes or quotas, according to the US think-tank International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). Food protectionism has led to a 17 percent reduction in total world food trade as measured in calories, the same level seen during the 2007-08 food and energy crisis. Since then, Indonesia and India have banned the export of palm oil and wheat respectively.

The continent’s rising debt crisis means that few countries have the means to buy or subsidise food prices, with Ghana, Zambia and Tunisia among the 20 or so countries close to defaulting on international loans.

The food crisis, the result of decisions taken by the world’s capitalist governments, is creating untold suffering for millions, exacerbating the class struggle. United Nations Development Programme Africa’s chief economist Raymond Gilpin warned the world’s financial elites, “Tensions, particularly in urban area, low-income communities, could spill over and lead to violent protests and violent riots.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact