

UN report: Record food import prices threaten food insecurity for hundreds of millions worldwide

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The United Nations is warning of substantial risks to food security around the world as soaring food prices place pressure, particularly on poor countries, to secure food supplies. Hundreds of millions face severe hunger worldwide as soaring prices on food and fertilizer are set to rise to record levels in 2022.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Food Outlook report released Friday estimates that the global food import bill, the price countries spend on foodstuffs, including cereals, oil crops, sugar, meat, dairy and fish, will rise to an all-time high of \$1.94 trillion in 2022, up 10 percent from last year.

This new forecast, marking an all-time high, is due to the depreciating values of currencies against the US dollar, the main currency of exchange on international markets, as well as the UN-NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

The report also cites climate variability and geopolitical tensions as the biggest factors contributing to food-security concerns. "Worryingly, many economically vulnerable countries are paying more while receiving less food," the FAO states in the report.

Although not specifically mentioned in the UN report, the criminal response of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic—fueling inflation, the food supply chain and currency crises—has been a major factor in exacerbating the food crisis and its attendant poverty and hunger.

The world agricultural input import bill is forecast to reach a new high of \$424 billion in 2022. This would represent a hike of 48 percent in costs compared to 2021, with 86 percent of this due to higher energy and fertilizer prices.

The war in Ukraine has hit poorer countries in the

Middle East and North Africa the hardest. These countries have extremely high import dependencies and have been further weakened by depreciating currencies against the dollar.

Prior to the war, Russia and Ukraine accounted for 30 percent of the world wheat trade and 78 percent of sunflower oil exports. The war in Ukraine has caused significant disruptions to Black Sea grain and fertilizers, with cultivation and exports severely damaged, a situation made worse by the strain on shipping in the region. World wheat trade is expected to fall 1 percent year-on-year due to a lack of exports from the region.

However, while world wheat production is forecast to reach a record 784 million tons over the coming year, bolstered mainly by substantial harvest recoveries in Canada and Russia, pushing global wheat inventories to record levels, these accumulations are expected mainly in China and Russia, while stocks are predicted to decline by 8 percent in the rest of world.

Poorer countries will feel the strain of these increased agricultural import costs most severely, with lower application of fertilizer taking place, further lowering productivity and total output of foodstuffs. The UN FAO said that "high world fertilizer prices are likely to extend into 2023, with negative repercussions for global agricultural output and food insecurity."

High-income and upper-middle-income countries are expected to account for 85 percent of world expenditures on imported food, driven mainly by costs. High-income countries continue to import across the spectrum of food products while so-called developing nations are forced to increasingly focus on staple food purchases.

While aggregate costs of food imports for low-income countries will remain largely unchanged, food imports are predicted to shrink by 10 percent in volume, making it increasingly difficult for these countries to finance the cost of food, threatening an alarming deepening of food insecurity.

For example, while sub-Saharan Africa, already hard-hit by malnutrition, will spend an estimated \$4.8 billion more on food imports in 2022, the region will see a decline in volumes of food imported worth \$0.7 billion. Net food-importing developing countries are expected to confront \$21.7 billion in extra costs for a mere \$4 billion of extra imported food volumes.

The climate crisis is directly affecting food production and prices. Recent devastating heatwaves in Europe have severely hampered grain output, with subsequent droughts leading to a 15-year low in corn production.

Since the Ukraine war began, the US Biden administration has pledged to deliver tens of billions of cubic meters of national gas to Europe, which will lead to a corresponding increase in greenhouse gas emissions, further deepening the climate crisis and exacerbating the continent's agricultural crisis.

The catastrophic floods that began in Pakistan in June are a horrific expression of the climate crisis, as water from glacial melting in the Himalayas coupled with unusually heavy rain have killed at least 1,700, injured thousands more and displaced at least 33 million.

More than 3.4 million children in Pakistan are facing chronic hunger. According to Save the Children, an estimated 760,000 children in flood-ravaged areas of the country are experiencing severe food shortages and at risk of severe malnutrition. Since the floods came, the number of people going hungry has soared by a staggering 45 percent, rising from 5.96 million before the floods hit to 8.62 million now facing emergency levels of food insecurity.

Haiti is the country in Latin America and the Caribbean most vulnerable to climate change, due to topography, poverty, land-use practices and limited infrastructure. According to the UN's FAO and World Food Program, "An unrelenting series of crises has trapped vulnerable Haitians in a cycle of growing desperation, without access to food, fuel, markets, jobs and public services."

Widespread deforestation and poor drainage structure

have increased Haiti's vulnerability to hurricanes, storm surges and flooding. Increasing temperatures during the dry months, strengthening tropical storms, have worsened climate impacts.

A record 4.7 million of the impoverished nation's 11.5 million people are currently facing acute hunger, including 1.8 million in the Emergency phase of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification index. For the first time ever in Haiti, 19,000 are in the Catastrophe phase of this index.

The country relies on imports for half of its food, including 80 percent of its rice. Any increase in the cost of food or a decrease in its volume, as predicted by the FAO's report, will result in starvation for countless more Haitians.

Hunger and malnourishment are not confined to countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The UK imports almost half of its food and the food supply has been aggravated by the pandemic and Brexit, which has disrupted its food supply chain.

Nearly 10 million adults and 4 million children of the UK's 67.5 million population are malnourished. Food insecurity affects one in four households with children and food banks are facing unprecedented demand.

Workers and their families in Europe and the United States are being shocked by an inflationary crisis, exacerbated by governments' homicidal response to the pandemic and the US-NATO war in Ukraine. They are being asked to pay the price in the form of rising prices for food, gas and housing, and job and wage cuts. These attacks have been met with an upsurge of workers' struggles against these brutal ruling class policies.

The FAO's Food Outlook report on the rising global food import bill, and the increasing food insecurity it threatens worldwide, points to the deadly consequences of a world economy subordinated to private profit. Global social inequality in the form of poverty and hunger is no more a natural phenomenon than the deaths due to imperialist war and the misery caused by the pandemic.



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