

## **ZIMBABWE: Focus on anticipated huge cereal deficit**

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JOHANNESBURG, 12 February (IRIN) - Indications are that the March/April harvest will not bring the hoped for relief to Zimbabwe's hungry millions - meaning that aid agencies will have to extend their feeding programmes well into the post-harvest months.

Most UN agencies, NGOs and other organisations responding to the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe had programmed their interventions to last through to March this year. However, forecasts of a "huge deficit" of cereal foods will necessitate extended operations to avoid a "potentially disastrous situation", Save the Children Fund's (SCF) Chris McIvor told IRIN.

Aid agencies estimated that over seven million Zimbabweans, more than half the population, would require food aid through March this year.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) warned in its latest food security report for Zimbabwe, released on Tuesday, that the government and NGO community needed to start planning for continued food aid, non-food aid and food imports for the 2003/04 consumption year.

This reinforced a similar warning in a recent humanitarian situation report by the UN Relief and Recovery Unit in Harare, which said the government of Zimbabwe had estimated "a deficit of 1.093 million mt for the 2003/2004 marketing year".

The report noted that "an important humanitarian consideration by stakeholders is the issue of resource availability and mobilisation for such a huge food deficit. This has to be programmed in time to avert the crisis".

The 2003/04 cereal crop deficit is blamed on below average rainfall during the key planting months of November and December 2002, slow distribution of agricultural inputs, a shortage of fertiliser and the late arrival of imported seed for planting.

While noting that the deficit projections so far were still speculative, McIvor said: "It's clear to us that we're looking at a very bad season in some parts of the country, like in Binga [Matabeleland North] which received significantly less than 50 percent rainfall - it's an area where you need 100 percent rainfall just to get a barely adequate harvest. This, combined with shortages of inputs and draught animals, means you are looking at a difficult and potentially disastrous situation."

SCF is one of several NGOs conducting food aid distributions and other humanitarian interventions in Zimbabwe.

A spokesman for the British Department for International Development (DFID) said agencies were already planning for the worst.

"The figures [available] now are extremely speculative. But from the figures we do have and the inferences you can draw from them, things do not look good for Zimbabwe. We expect that feeding will simply have to continue unreduced in some parts of the country [post-harvest when food aid should not normally be needed]. Which parts and how it's going to be done, is something the WFP [World Food Programme] is starting to plan for," the spokesman said.

WFP spokesman Luis Clemens told IRIN there was not doubt that the next harvest would realise a "significant drop in production", however, he noted that it was still too early to make accurate predictions.

The DFID spokesman added that the impact of another poor harvest on people who had already undergone "a punishing year" would be severe. "People are very much weakened by HIV/AIDS, households do not have the capacity [to cope], they are physically weaker than a year ago," the spokesman noted.

When extrapolated upon, the present deficit projections were "very frightening, which is why we need to have a proper and transparent system to respond, this is a major challenge for everyone [government and NGOs]. This is a very unusual sort of crisis, it's not a simple emergency. [It was complicated by] fuel shortages, forex shortages, rail rolling stock [deterioration] etc. It's very hard to plan effectively, which is why we need everyone to cooperate. And people are starting to meet and plan and think about this," the DFID spokesman said.

McIvor, meanwhile, underlined the erosion of household coping mechanisms.

"We just released a nutrition survey done in Binga ... [and] while we haven't seen a significant rise in malnutrition, which is reassuring, the evidence we are getting points to a reduction in people's ability to cope.

"People have divested themselves of most of their assets, prices of livestock have plummeted, because people are selling their cattle and goats. So the assets that people have are severely depleted, more kids are out of school and they are spending more time trying to find wild foods, in some cases wild foods are not being prepared adequately and children are having to be hospitalised. All of these factors - which point to the fact that we are facing another year of drought and a reduced harvest - mean that people's ability to cope is severely compromised," McIvor said.

Awareness of the impact of macro-economic circumstances on the humanitarian crisis was also key, McIvor added.

The FEWS NET report said: "Maize production is expected to be about 800,000 mt, leaving a 900,000 mt deficit for the 2003/04 marketing year. [But] the government's capacity to fill this gap through imports is limited by the foreign currency shortage. This shortage is exacerbated by poor tobacco earnings, which are expected to be at their lowest level in 10 years.

"At sub-national level, based on the development of crops and the rainfall season so far, there are already strong indications that most households in

the southern and central districts of the country, some of which have experienced four consecutive years of poor harvests and have had their coping mechanisms exhausted, will have serious food security problems in the coming year."

The report also noted that "shortages of basic consumer goods, which started in February 2002, only seem to be worsening. Included on this list of scarce items are: sugar, cooking oil, maize, maize meal, milk, beef, bread and transport."

In addition, a number of manufacturing companies have closed down, relocated to neighbouring countries or scaled back operations since the government introduced more price controls in November 2002.

McIvor noted the importance of keeping the world informed that "behind the statistics are lives that need to be saved", to ensure that the donor response would be adequate.

"If food needs are not met, then the collapse into severe levels of malnutrition could take place very quickly. The message is this: there's every reason to be more worried and there are no grounds for complacency," he warned.

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