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The Food Aid Organization of the United Nations

News Release

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MILLIONS FACE FOOD SHORTAGES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AMID FUNDING CRISIS

JOHANNESBURG – The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) today warned that millions of people in southern Africa will face massive food shortages as early as next month due to significant funding shortfalls. The shortages will be most acute in Zimbabwe and Mozambique where food needs are greatest.

In July, WFP appealed for US\$308 million to fund some 540,000 tonnes of food, enough to feed 6.5 million people until June of next year in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland, Lesotho and Malawi. Despite repeated appeals, WFP has received only 24 percent of what is required, and has unmet needs amounting to US\$235 million.

“The situation is incredibly serious,” said James T. Morris, WFP Executive Director and Special Envoy for Southern Africa. “In Mozambique, rations for hundreds of thousands of people may have to be cut, or they may get nothing at all unless our appeal receives an immediate cash injection. It’s already too late for food aid to arrive from abroad to meet needs in October and November.”

WFP’s appeal for southern Africa, of which Zimbabwe accounts for about two thirds, is based on an assumption that governments will meet commercial import targets. However, in Zimbabwe’s case, a severe lack of foreign exchange is clearly affecting the country’s ability to import food. This means that food aid needs may further increase between now and the harvest in April 2004.

Compounding the food shortage in Zimbabwe is the steep economic decline stemming from a combination of factors, including the huge drop in cereal and cash crop production. Currently Zimbabwe is experiencing an inflation rate of over 400 percent and infant mortality rates have doubled in the country since 1998.

A memorandum of understanding, which was signed yesterday by the Government of Zimbabwe and WFP’s Country Director in Harare, is expected to help facilitate the flow of food aid to millions of needy beneficiaries distributed through WFP’s 13 NGO implementing partners.

However, given the current funding level, the entire region is expected to experience food pipeline breaks by early next year, which will coincide with the lean season when the number of beneficiaries will be highest and the general food deficit greatest.

Compounding the food shortages in southern Africa is the HIV/AIDS virus. The region has the highest

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HIV prevalence rates in the world and there has been an alarming increase in the number of households headed by children, the chronically ill and grandparents. Furthermore, because productivity in the agricultural sector is especially hard hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, food shortages and chronic poverty are likely to persist.

“HIV/AIDS and food shortages go hand in hand in this region,” said Mike Sackett, WFP Regional Director for Southern Africa. “The best way of supporting people affected by the virus is to ensure they are well nourished, but clearly this will not be the case for many people over the coming months unless there’s an immediate and sustained response from donors.”

In Swaziland, more than 38 percent of mothers attending pre-natal clinics test sero-positive, one child in five under the age of 15 will be orphaned by 2005. The most disturbing prediction is that life expectancy will fall below 30 years of age by 2010 if current HIV/AIDS trends continue.

“Just because the world’s attention moves on to the next crisis doesn’t mean the need for humanitarian assistance fades,” Sackett said. “In fact, it’s at exactly this time that donors need to stand by people to ensure there’s full recovery so they can resume their normal lives. Otherwise, it doesn’t take long for situations to unravel and then donors have to step in again, but usually at a much higher human and financial cost.”

WFP has been carrying out emergency feeding in the region since 2001; the peak of operations was reached last year when 10.2 million people received WFP food aid.

Donors that have made significant contributions to WFP for its southern Africa appeal include: the United States – US\$37 million; EC-EuropeAid – US\$28.5 million; Italy – US\$2.7 million; Denmark – US\$1.2 million; and Ireland – US\$1.1 million.

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