

Warning of Famine in West Africa

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The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) warns that 10 million people across the Sahel region of West Africa could face famine over the next few months. According to the charity Oxfam, eight million in Niger could be affected and two million in Chad. Some 80 percent of Chad's population depends on subsistence agriculture.

The threat of famine is growing across the region. Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and even Northern Nigeria are already experiencing food shortages. The strategic grain reserve in Nigeria is 65,000 tonnes short. There are reports of people crossing the Niger border into Nigeria in search of food. This is an area that has experienced communal clashes over resources.

"The Sahel is one of the most destitute regions in the world, and the spectre of hunger is pushing increasing numbers of people from the countryside into the cities, where they are searching for food to feed their families", said Thomas Yanga of the WFP.

Nomadic herders in Niger have been particularly badly hit. At the end of the year they start to move south to look for grazing for their animals, but because of irregular rainfall there is insufficient pasture. Some have resorted to selling their animals, but are getting low prices because of their poor condition.

Warnings of a possible food emergency have been sounded since the beginning of the year. Brian O'Neill, regional director of the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Organisation, toured the area in January.

He said, "Erratic rains in the 2009/2010 agricultural season have resulted in an enormous deficit in food production.... You are talking about a crisis of enormous proportions.... If we work fast enough, early enough, it will not be a famine. If we don't move, there is a strong risk it could be happening".

He estimated that more than US\$220 million would be needed to avert a food crisis. A leaked Niger government document confirmed O'Neill's concerns. It forecast that half the population would experience food shortages in the coming year.

The West African countries facing food shortages are all in the Sahel region running along the southern edge of the Sahara desert. They are subject to erratic rainfall, but experts consider that global warming is exacerbating water shortage. The irregular rainfall in the 2009 rainy season has meant a shortage of pasture and poor harvests.

The current near-term outlook map for West Africa of the United States Agency for International Development's Famine Early Warning System shows large swathes of

Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad as being highly food insecure. The medium-term outlook map shows a big area within Niger as extremely food insecure.

An Oxfam report of May 20 states that this year's harvest in Niger is around three-quarters of last year's and that in the Diffa region in the east and Tillabery region in the west there was no harvest. The harvest in Chad is down a third on last year.

Mamadou Biteye, an Oxfam regional director, recalled the experience of the famine of 2005. "In 2005, the world ignored warning signs from Niger and lives were lost". Some four million people were affected by that famine.

A UN Food and Agricultural Organisation special alert notice was issued on May 19. It warned, "The food situation is of grave concern in parts of the Sahel, notably in Niger".

It pointed out that the region is still suffering from high prices sparked by speculation in food in 2008. It noted that the current drop in cereal and pasture production is taking place "against a backdrop of high food prices".

The notice continued, "Cereal prices have remained well above the pre-food crisis level two years ago, notably in the eastern and central Sahel countries. Although coarse grain prices have declined from their peak of August-September 2008, millet [a staple food] prices in April 2010 in the markets of Burkina Faso...Mali...and Niger...were still 28 percent, 27 percent and 12 percent higher respectively than in the corresponding period of 2008...the recent strengthening of the Naira (Nigerian currency) against the CFA Franc as well as increased fuel prices in some countries are expected to lead to a further surge in food prices in the short term. By contrast, livestock prices have declined significantly, leading to a significant deterioration of the terms of trade for pastoralists".

The UK *Independent* newspaper noted, "Even in better times, roughly half of Niger's children suffered stunted growth". A Medecins Sans Frontieres report of 2008, entitled "Starved for Attention," explained, "Mothers in the Sahel...don't just need advice about how to feed their children. They need access to energy-dense, animal-source foods that contain the 40 essential nutrients a young child needs to grow and be healthy".

Dr. Susan Shepherd, who was co-coordinator for the nutritional programme in Maradi, Niger, in 2007, noted, "Eating millet porridge every day is the equivalent of living off bread and water.... Young children are so susceptible to malnutrition because what they eat lacks essential vitamins and minerals...".

Two feeding stations currently being run by Niger have seen the number of children being brought who suffer from malnutrition double in recent weeks. About 1,000 children a week are arriving at these projects for help.

Despite the fact that the situation in the Sahel has been developing over many years and is well documented, no adequate steps have been taken to remedy the situation. The World Food Programme is about \$100 million short of the funding it needs to finance its work in Niger alone as a result of cuts in aid following the global recession. Oxfam, one of the non-governmental agencies that operate in the region, is \$17.5 million short.

The present crisis is the direct result of the failure of the former colonial powers and African governments to invest in agricultural infrastructure and poverty reduction.

Despite the revenue produced by oil, 70 percent of agriculture in Nigeria is rain-fed. This has left food production highly vulnerable to climate change.

Recent government agricultural schemes have failed, because the funds have been siphoned off to corrupt politicians. Nigeria could be feeding the region. Instead, it is the world's second largest importer of food. Those who can afford expensive imported foods will be untouched by the famine, and some will profit from it, but the majority of the population, who live on less than \$2 a day, will face serious hardship.

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