

SOUTHERN AFRICA - The Next Niger?

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Images of skeletal children in Niger, wasted away by malnutrition, have featured prominently in the media over recent weeks. Amidst efforts to alleviate this suffering, however, there are fears that the crisis in Niger may undermine donor willingness to tackle problems elsewhere on the continent – notably in Southern Africa.

About 10 million people in the Southern African region will need food aid until the middle of 2006.

“WFP (the United Nations World Food Programme) operates in nine Southern African countries. Six of them have acute problems with harvests for 2005: Mozambique, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia and Lesotho,” Mike Huggins, a spokesman for the agency, told IPS. “In Zimbabwe alone, 4.3 million people need food aid.” (The country has a population of about 13 million.)

Malawi has also been hard hit. The country has reaped its smallest maize harvest since 1992, and produced just 37 percent of the cereals needed for national consumption during the coming year, according to a government assessment.

The WFP estimates that relatively small sum of 270 million dollars will be needed to feed people in Southern Africa until the next harvest in April 2006. But to date, only a few donors have made contributions, and it seems unlikely that substantial amounts of new funding will be pledged any time soon.

“We have got only 75 million dollars,” says Huggins. “At the moment we are not particularly optimistic. There are always other hotspots like Niger and Darfur that need emergency aid.”

At present, 80 non-governmental organisations and 13 U.N. agencies are active in the troubled western Sudanese region of Darfur, according to a report issued last month by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The number of people caught up in political turmoil in the area is said to have increased from just over one million in May 2004 to 2.9 million in June 2005.

“This new figure includes nearly 1.9 million internally displaced persons and over 200,000 refugees in Chad, plus drought-affected people and nomadic communities that have been affected by the conflict but did not begin to receive humanitarian assistance until early 2005,” Annan said in his report.

In Niger an estimated 3.5 million people are starving and in need emergency food aid. Drought and poverty are the main causes of the food shortages, but over the past year the former French colony has also been ravaged by locusts.

While a lack of rain and money have also contributed to the food crisis in Southern Africa, bad governance shoulders part of the blame for shortages in this region.

Critics of Zimbabwe's government say a round of farm seizures that got underway in 2000 undermined agricultural production. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe accuses former colonial power Britain of undermining his country's economy in retaliation for the fact that land has been taken out of white hands.

The situation in Southern Africa is further complicated by the AIDS pandemic that has swept through the region. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, "by 2020 the HIV/AIDS epidemic will claim the lives of 20 percent or more of the population working in agriculture in many Southern African countries."

During a news conference last month, the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute urged African countries to embrace genetically modified (GM) foods to reduce shortages. However, Idah Sithole-Niang, one of the authors of a new study about genetically modified crops, says the continent does not have systems in place which would allow governments to take this step responsibly.

"Unfortunately, most African countries lack the expertise, capacity and funding to develop and comply with biosafety regulatory requirements," she noted during the news conference. "As a result, GM crops remain out of the hands of farmers and their benefits go unrealised."

Three years ago Zambia refused to accept genetically modified food aid to alleviate food shortages that affected hundreds of thousands of people, citing concerns about the safety of the aid.

The WFP fears that if the food crisis in Southern Africa is neglected, levels of malnutrition in the region could eventually resemble those in Niger, where donors initially disregarded appeals for aid.

"We are raising the alarm now," says Huggins.

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