

Another Poor Harvest Beckons

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Tilling on some of the best farmland in the country hasn't even started yet.

With serious shortages of fertiliser and maize seed, Zimbabwe faces another poor harvest - even if it receives good rains this season.

Some retail outlets last received fertiliser in April and there have been very few deliveries of maize seed.

An employee at one outlet, Farm & City, told IWPR, "We have no idea when and how many bags of fertiliser we will receive. The situation does not look very good, yet people should be planting their crops now. The last delivery of fertiliser we had was in April this year. We are telling people to keep checking every week."

At the Zimbabwe Fertiliser Company, which should be working overtime now, employees said they had no idea when they would have any fertiliser to sell. They explained that domestic production had been hit because foreign currency shortages meant that raw materials could not be purchased, while power cuts and fuel shortages had also taken their toll.

The country needs about 650,000 tonnes of fertiliser every cropping season.

Worsening an already dire situation is the fact that there has been very little land preparation for the 2007 farming season.

Each day planting is delayed results in lost yield. Agricultural experts say a ten-day delay could contribute to a 20 per cent reduction in yield.

A drive around the countryside brings a sickening feeling of despair. There is very little activity on the country's farms, particularly in the large-scale farming areas. Normally by now, land would have been tilled and the planting of various crops would be underway.

But when IWPR drove along the Harare-Masvingo road past Beatrice, an area with some of the best soil in the country, tilling on most farms had not even started. Yet this was once a prime large-scale farming area

The first rains of the season, which have been falling in the past two weeks, have found large tracts of unprepared land - a bad omen for a country which once boasted the most sophisticated agricultural industry on the African continent.

"It was disheartening to watch such beautiful soils going to waste and it is the same everywhere along Zimbabwe's highways from Harare," said our driver as he looked at the fallow lands. He knows the picture well, for he travels regularly round the country.

Some farmers on land along the country's highways said they had been threatened with farm seizures if

they did not at least plant something now along these roads.

“They want to make people travelling along the highways believe that there is some activity,” said one farmer.

“Remember these farms used to be green with some product all year round. We don’t want to admit to failure so it is better to give a wrong impression.

“The problem we have had is that we are now mostly concentrating on making a quick dollar. So those that received subsidised fuel from government have sold it on the black market and have made a killing. Most of the stuff being given is ending up on the black market. That is Zimbabwe for you.”

The situation on the ground is contrary to the forecast by Reserve Bank Governor Gideon Gono and Agriculture Minister Rugare Gumbo that the 2007-2008 season they have dubbed the “mother of all farming seasons” was going to be a success.

Gono, whose job is to ensure the availability of funding to acquire the inputs farmers need, has said he is looking at the coming summer season as the end of all food insecurity the country has experienced during the past few years.

He said the Central Bank had made all necessary arrangements to source fertiliser locally and outside the country, and some product had already been received by the Grain Marketing Board.

Gumbo has said the country was targeting, at a minimum, two million hectares under maize, 60,000 ha under tobacco, 400,000 ha under grains, 400,000 ha under cotton and 200, 000 ha under soya beans. But this seems a tall order considering the lack of preparedness.

Gumbo claimed he had already sourced the required seed and fertiliser and was attempting to ensure that new farmers and those working subsistence communal lands had adequate inputs and equipment which would re-establish the country as a net exporter of agricultural produce.

His claim was disputed by producers, who recently told a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Lands, Land Reform, Resettlement, Agriculture and Water that there was insufficient seed and fertiliser for the new farming season because the government’s recent price controls had resulted in unrealistic prices, which had created shortages of these inputs.

“We are facing problems getting seed from growers, who are not willing to release their seed due to the price, which they say is not viable,” said a spokesman for the Seed Trade Association.

They had only received half of their total requirement of 20,000 metric tonnes.

The government's fast-track land reform programme dispossessed about 4,000 white commercial farmers of prime agricultural land, ostensibly to correct a history of skewed ownership. Critics allege the ruling ZANU-PF party and other government officials, including high-ranking army and police officers, took over

the best estates.

Since the onset of the land redistribution programme, the country has recorded increasingly acute food shortages, and international donor agencies estimate that more than a third of the population, or 4.1 million people, require emergency food assistance this year.

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