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Grain Supplies Running Low

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Although the government insists everything is fine, domestic grain production is down on last year and imports may not cover the shortfall.

As food security in Zimbabwe continues to deteriorate, a famine warning agency has classed the situation there as an “emergency”, while local millers have warned that the country may soon run out of grain.

In a report on August 9, the Famine Early Warning System Network, FEWS NET, a United States agency which monitors hunger worldwide - attributed the food crisis to an ongoing economic decline made worse by a poor harvest, the government’s recent price controls and restrictions on basic commodity imports.

All these factors, the report said, have “caused a significant decrease in Zimbabwe’s food security, especially in the southwest and in urban areas”.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a miller based in Harare said, “We collect our maize from the Grain Marketing Board depot at Murewa [a district 75 km northeast from the capital Harare] but there hasn’t been any maize there in the past few weeks. Our stocks are running out very quickly.”

He said the situation was the same at Harare’s main depot, Aspindale, where millers from the rest of the country collect their consignments.

In a recent report, The Herald, a government newspaper, revealed that the winter wheat harvest this year was half the size of last year’s, and that only 45,000 hectares instead of the projected 76,000 had been harvested.

In June this year, FEWS NET warned that Zimbabwe faced a shortfall of one million tonnes of maize, sorghum and millet – about 800,000 tonnes of it maize. It urged the government and donor community to mobilise for an immediate and coordinated response to address the growing levels of food shortages in the country.

“There is a general consensus that Zimbabwe’s 2006-2007 cereal production has to be complemented by imports of over one million [tonnes] if the country is to meet cereal requirements for the 2007/08 consumption year.”

According to FEWS NET, Zimbabwe’s domestic grain production meets only 55 per cent of the country’s needs.

The government’s grain monopoly, the Grain Marketing Board, GMB - which was established to ensure food security, particularly in relation to staples such as maize and wheat - has dismissed reports that the country is running out of grain.

But its frantic efforts to import supplies, particularly maize, suggest otherwise.

Last month, agriculture minister Rugare Gumbo told the press that Zimbabwe was importing 200,000 tonnes of maize from Tanzania.

“We have been importing maize from Zambia and Malawi. Right now, we are finalising the modalities to import maize from Tanzania," he said.

But a proposed deal to import 400,000 tonnes of maize from neighbouring Malawi was reportedly delayed because of Zimbabwe’s inability to pay.

In an interview this week with the government paper The Herald, the GMB’s acting chief executive, Samuel Muvuti, said the maize expected from Malawi was not rolling in due to “logistical problems in that country”.

However, Malawi’s finance minister Goodall Gondwe, quoted in the Nyasa Times, suggested that negotiations had focused on Zimbabwe’s readiness to pay for the maize.

“We’ve reached an agreement and we are sure that they will pay us,” he said.

According to FEWS NET, 115,000 tonnes of an expected 400,000 have so far been imported. The agency also said the World Food Programme and C-SAFE, a consortium of aid providers, are considering importing around 352,000 tonnes of maize to make up the shortfall.

But the agency has now raised doubts about whether the GMB has the capacity to distribute the grain even if enough is imported. “The GMB’s ability to distribute maize is a serious concern, as in the past GMB distributions have been erratic and local shortages are common,” said the latest FEWS NET report.

There is also concern that the GMB is vulnerable to political manipulation by the ruling ZANU-PF party, which has an interest in seeing that grain goes to areas seen as loyalist rather than opposition constituencies.

While the Zimbabwe government blames crop shortages on the droughts that have ravaged the country in the past few years, its critics say the government’s controversial agricultural policies are the cause.

In particular, they point to the controversial land reform programme, which the government launched in 2000 to confiscate land from white commercial farmers and redistribute it to poor and middle-income landless black Zimbabweans. Much of the land went to farmers with no experience of large-scale farming, and some went to senior regime figures who had no interest in turning the farms round.

Government critics say that like all tropical countries, Zimbabwe is naturally prone to drought, but the commercial farmers had mitigated the effects by installing modern irrigation systems, which were then vandalised and neglected during the chaotic land grab.

The GMB told the Cabinet Taskforce on Pricing on August 7 that besides the lack of maize, its work had been greatly affected by a June government directive to slash prices of goods and services in an attempt to counter soaring inflation.

In response, the taskforce told the GMB and millers to comply with the regulations or face prosecution, and warned that a law would soon be enacted to impose mandatory two-year jail terms for traders found guilty of over-pricing.

Although millers agreed to comply with the directive, they said the pricing formula was not sustainable and would only make the food situation worse.

By the time they have bought maize from the GMB, transported it to their mills, paid their workers, and taken care of other overheads including packaging, they say they make a profit of just 2,000 Zimbabwean dollars, ZWD – roughly 13 US cents – on each 10 kilogram bag.

“They say we should sell a 10 kg bag of maize meal for 37 ZWD when it costs us 35,000 ZWD to produce it,” said a miller who spoke on condition of anonymity. “It simply won’t do.”

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