

Harare: Grim Harvest Predictions

Author: [Jabu Shoko](#)

Zimbabwe said to be facing another poor grain harvest next year because of severe shortages of seed and fertiliser.

It rained in most parts of Zimbabwe last week, signalling the official start of the planting season in this troubled country.

Most farmers here start putting the maize seed in the ground during the first week of November to take advantage of the start of the rains. But agricultural experts told IWPR the lashing downpours, which came after a serious heat wave, would count for nothing, as the Harare government was ill-prepared for taking advantage of it.

“The country does not have foreign currency to procure fertiliser, seed, fuel, farming implements and spare parts for tractors and other farming implements,” said Renson Gasela, an agricultural expert who is also the agriculture spokesman for the small, breakaway faction of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

“If the truth be told, nothing is happening on the farms. Some of those black farmers given land by Mugabe are content with hunting the few wildlife left on the properties instead of tilling land to feed hungry Zimbabweans. The country is starting another disastrous agriculture season.”

Nelson Chamisa, the spokesman for the main MDC faction headed by Morgan Tsvangirai, concurred, noting that the little fertiliser, seed and fuel that trickle in from China, Mugabe’s all-weather friend, was quickly being diverted to the farms given to big-wigs in his ZANU-PF party.

“This country needs change now if we are to avert hunger every year,” said Chamisa. “The government does not have money to procure agricultural inputs. There’s also chaos in the farming sector as ZANU-PF functionaries continue invading farms instead of letting those who know the business of farming go ahead with the job.”

The commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Force, General Constantine Chiwenga, assisted by senior military officials, has been tasked with identifying the beneficiaries of agricultural inputs. When the maize seed and fertiliser arrive from China, they are doled out at ZANU-PF rallies to party members and senior government officials; perceived opposition supporters go empty-handed.

The United Nations estimates between 5 and 5.5 million Zimbabweans, or nearly half the population, will need emergency food rations next year. Last year’s harvests failed because of fertiliser and fuel shortages. Currently, about 5.1 million people are reportedly receiving food handouts from local and international food relief agencies.

The respected Famine Early Warning Unit last week issued a warning that Zimbabwe would be facing another inadequate grain harvest next year because of severe shortages of seed and fertiliser.

The Washington-based Famine Early Warning Systems Network said the southern African nation had only 19 per cent of the maize seed it needed to meet its planting plans, and even if it was able to import more,

the country was unlikely to be able to get it in the ground in time.

Zimbabwe was also facing a fertiliser shortage, with current stocks standing at a mere one per cent of requirements.

“Given the critical shortages of seed and fertiliser, 2008-2009 prospects are poor unless resources can quickly be mobilised to address these shortages,” said a spokesperson for the organisation, who added that “given current economic turmoil, political instability, and the necessity to direct resources to import and distribute food, improving access to inputs remains a challenge”.

The continuing ejection of white farmers from their land has not helped matters. A few weeks ago, the prime farmland of the chairman of the Commercial Farmers Union was invaded by marauding ZANU-PF militia who gave him only a few hours to vacate the farm. Elsewhere, beneficiaries of Mugabe’s land reform suspected of voting for Tsvangirai are being pushed out of properties at a time they are supposed to be readying the land for the start of the planting season.

At the same time, a substantial bailout promised by the South African government to bankroll Zimbabwe’s agricultural season – specifically the procurement of maize seed, fertiliser and farming implements – has not materialised because it is subject to the fulfilment of a precarious power-sharing agreement between Mugabe and Tsvangirai. Trevor Manuel, South Africa’s finance minister, told his country’s parliament in October that the aid package for Zimbabwe would be provided only once a government had been formed and humanitarian relief agencies were free to deliver aid.

Manuel said the money was “subject to acceptance of an appropriate role for food relief agencies by a recognised multiparty government”.

Aid agencies claim that the government is continuing to hinder their efforts to deliver food to starving Zimbabweans, some reportedly surviving by scavenging for wild fruits and edible roots.

The multi-party government the South Africans are waiting for does not seem likely to be formed anytime soon. Mugabe and Tsvangirai are at loggerheads over the allocation of ministries in an all-inclusive government. A full SADC summit in South Africa on November 9 failed to break the impasse. Mugabe has insisted on holding on to the entire security apparatus, while Tsvangirai has offered a compromise: ZANU-PF can take charge of the military while the MDC controls the police. Regional leaders directed that Mugabe and Tsvangirai share the interior ministry, a proposal flatly rejected by the opposition leader.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe.

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