

ZANU PF Admits Food Crisis

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Acknowledgement comes after regime long claimed that it had no need for foreign agricultural aid.

The ZANU PF government this month admitted that it faced serious food shortages ahead of the traditional May harvest, confounding President Robert Mugabe's frequent boasts of an expected bumper harvest.

A statement carried in the state-controlled Herald newspaper said that about 1.5 million people would need emergency supplies of maize corn, the staple diet, in the western and eastern provinces of Matabeleland and Manicaland.

But the main famine and weather-monitoring organisation in southern Africa said the situation was many times worse than indicated by the government mouthpiece. The Johannesburg-based Famine Early Warning System Network, FEWSNET, said 4.8 million Zimbabweans, nearly half the current population, urgently require food aid or they could starve.

FEWSNET confirmed that the situation was particularly serious in rural areas of the drier provinces of Matabeleland, Masvingo and Manicaland and also in some parts of the lower Zambezi Valley. But the food situation is also deteriorating in towns, where inflation of 400 per cent is causing food prices to skyrocket against falling real incomes, FEWSNET said.

For almost two years, the government has claimed Zimbabwe had sufficient homegrown maize to feed its 11.5 million people.

Last year, Mugabe told British television, "We are not hungry. Why foist this food on us? We don't want to be choked. We have enough." His statement caused fear among donors that millions would possibly go hungry.

Mugabe's hard-line information minister Jonathan Moyo, sacked last month, used the state-controlled press to say the country would produce about 2.4 million tonnes of maize this summer season, more than the country's normal 1.8 million tonne requirement. The harvest will, in fact, be less than 850,000 tonnes, according to independent estimates.

Bulawayo City Council reported in the minutes of its last meeting that at least ten people, most of them children under five, were known to have died recently of starvation. Mayor Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube said many more would perish in the coming months from illnesses induced by lack of food.

Archbishop Pius Ncube, the outspoken Roman Catholic prelate of Bulawayo, accused Mugabe of withholding food for electoral purposes, distributing it only in areas where people could be bribed to vote for the ruling ZANU PF party. "They want to control the food and politicise it," he said. "They'd rather kill people for the sake of power."

Many other critics of the troubled southern African nation say Zimbabwe's food security has been heavily compromised by politics and propaganda.

On the one hand, Mugabe cannot accept food aid from the same western governments he accuses of trying to "recolonise" his country. On the other, ZANU PF must show the world that its often violent seizure of about 4,000 white-owned farms has, far from leading to food shortages, led to a food surplus.

Nevertheless, in January, maize meal [ground maize] again disappeared from supermarket shelves in towns across the country. The much promised food surplus had come to nothing and disgruntled shoppers were forced to buy imported rice or flour at prices they could barely afford. Thousands of once productive fields throughout the country have turned brown and are overgrown with weeds.

Paul Themba Nyathi, spokesman for the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, said, "The government is already using food as an election weapon. It is telling communities, 'If you vote against the government, if you vote for the opposition, you won't get food.'"

The shortage prompted the government to blame millers, accusing them of stockpiling maize in an effort to force a price increase.

Zimbabwe's independent press took up the issue for the first time in January. The weekly Zimbabwe Independent pointed out that the South African Grain Information Service, Sagis, published weekly statistics on grain and wheat exports to the region. Zimbabwe was the biggest recipient of both maize and wheat, some of it imported from as far away as Argentina.

Commercial Farmers' Union economist Kuda Ndoro told IWPR that food imports to Zimbabwe continue unabated.

"If you go to the government Grain Marketing Board depot in Harare, you'll see queues of trucks from Zambia and South Africa," Ndoro said. "They're all loaded with maize and wheat."

Since Zimbabwe's farm invasions began in February 2000 the country has lost its status as the region's breadbasket. From a net exporter of food, it now imports to feed its increasingly impoverished millions.

Meanwhile tobacco, the commodity that once drove the country's economy, has slumped to a meagre output of about 60 million kilogrammes, down from more than 230 million five years ago.

Once the world's number two producer of high grade Virginia leaf, Zimbabwe no longer produces a crop of either quality or weight. ZANU PF's self-styled war veterans have forced some 1,400 large-scale tobacco growers off their farms. Scores of farmers and their families stood helplessly by while angry mobs destroyed homes and pillaged equipment.

As many as a million farm workers and their families may have been made homeless in a process that saw thousands tortured, beaten and raped while workers' houses were burned to the ground by angry mobs of ZANU PF supporters.

The result has been predictable, economists say. Tobacco, the engine that has driven the economy since the 1960s, has failed. Efforts by the central bank to revive the crop will not succeed, say ex-farmers. A programme ambitiously called "Vision 160" unveiled by central bank governor Gideon Gono aimed to increase production to 160 million kilogrammes of the golden leaf. But coal shortages for curing and fertiliser shortages are likely to lead to an even smaller crop this year.

"It's more likely to be closer to 40 million kilogrammes," said ex-farmer and member of lobby group Justice for Agriculture Bruce Gemmill. "There are no proper inputs and the new farmers lack the capital to borrow enough to grow a sizeable crop."

The demise of Zimbabwe's farming sector has seen white farmers head for the diaspora.

Deprived of their livelihoods, some have moved into the capital Harare to start new businesses. Others have been welcomed elsewhere in Africa. Hundreds of farmers moved to neighbouring Zambia, others to Mozambique, Botswana and Malawi. Others have gone further still to Nigeria.

Some African leaders have encouraged Zimbabwe's farmers to move, but, fearful of criticism from Mugabe, have done so discreetly. In Nigeria, farmers can claim up to 1,000 hectares of fertile land and borrow over one million US dollars at very low rates to get them started in the country's most populous nation.

"It's an attractive offer. The markets up there are enormous and the demand for food huge," said Gemmill.

Brian Latham was a freelance correspondent for Bloomberg News in Zimbabwe. He recently fled the country and has for the time being sought refuge in London.

Location: Africa

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zanu-pf-admits-food-crisis>