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SOUTHERN AFRICA: Solution for food crisis political

JOHANNESBURG, 4 Dec 2002 (IRIN) - Hunger in Africa today is a creation of politics and demands political solutions, the World Food Programme's (WFP) Executive Director James T Morris told the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

Some 38 million Africans are at risk from an unprecedented food crisis, but "mass starvation in Africa is not inevitable," Morris said in an open briefing to the council. "Political decisions by some African governments - and by the governments of the developed world - have made it hard for the continent to feed itself."

In the short term, an infusion of funds was urgently needed, while long-term goals must include greater investment in agriculture and changes in international trade regimes.

Examining the causes for the "explosion in food emergencies," Morris cited collapsing economic systems, political and ethnic violence, HIV/AIDS and weather conditions. All of those factors have combined to exacerbate Africa's critical situation, while in Southern Africa WFP has received pledges of only 56 percent of the US \$511 million needed to help meet needs.

The WFP chief urged major changes, including a shift from reliance on the United States for food aid. "Last year, the US provided 62 percent of all food aid worldwide," he said. "This is simply not sustainable."

He added that the recent controversy over genetically modified (GM) food in Southern Africa demonstrated the dangers of relying too heavily on a single donor. "Requirements by some of the Southern African [countries] that GM maize from the US be milled have created a logistical nightmare and we have been left scrambling, trying to raise more cash contributions from other donors while confronting the complexities of milling the maize to ensure there is no break in the food pipeline."

At the same time, Morris urged the creation of a new global trade environment, stressing that developing countries "simply cannot compete with developed country subsidies that now amount to US \$1 billion a day and allow food to flow into poorer countries, making investments in agriculture unprofitable."

"People are hungry because their governments have made the wrong political decisions," he said. "In the end, hunger is a political creation and we must use political means to end it."

According to a paper by researcher Alex de Waal, currently with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), a new and unfamiliar type of famine was in the making in Southern Africa, linked to HIV/AIDS.

The implications for humanitarian assistance, de Waal suggested, were far-reaching. These included the need for the humanitarian response to match the scale of the crisis, long-term welfarism, and strategies for rehabilitation, recovery and development carefully designed in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its adverse impact on labour supply, adult life expectancy and capacity of national institutions.

The school drop-out rate, especially for girl children from poor households, was another indication of the long-term development costs of the current crisis.

Data from a UNICEF-supported survey in primary schools in six provinces in Zambia has shown dramatic declines in school attendance for both boys and girls. A community school in Siavonga district - an area badly affected by the drought - recorded a drop in girls' school attendance from 75 percent in April 2002 to 17 percent in September; for boys the decline was from 71 percent to 24 percent, UNICEF said.

Speaking to a meeting of African education ministers on Tuesday, UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy announced a campaign to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005. The campaign, which includes 15 countries in Africa, focuses on countries where girls are furthest behind - and where progress would make a real impact.

"UNICEF advocates investment in girls' education as an entryway for all children to fulfill their right to a quality basic education. A singular focus on getting girls into school works to bring down the barriers that keep all children out of school. Moreover, when girls are educated they are more likely to ensure the education and health of their own children - a cyclical effect of enormous importance," a UNICEF statement explained.

WFP has launched a campaign, Africa Hunger Alert at:
<http://www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=3>

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