

Starvation Catastrophe Threatens 30 Million

by Uwe Friesecke

While the attention of Western governments and the world media has been directed to the looming war against Iraq, an unparalleled humanitarian crisis is readying itself in Africa, which threatens to overshadow all news of disasters we have received from Africa in the past 30 years, including even the Ethiopian hunger catastrophe of 1984-85. According to the latest estimations of the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) and its Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), more than 30 million Africans are threatened by extreme hunger by the beginning of 2003, and this crisis can only be overcome if the community of nations musters a voluminous provision of food aid. Although the FAO has repeatedly warned of the rising crisis during the course of this year, offers of aid have been half-hearted so far. This hunger disaster could be stopped in a short time, if the political will to do so were at hand among the European and American governments.

The crisis has meanwhile expanded its grip over three large regions in Africa. In Southern Africa, all the countries except South Africa, Namibia, and Botswana, have been stricken. More than 14 million people are in danger there. Malawi had already declared a national emergency back in February; Lesotho, in April; and Zambia, in May. In the region where the crisis has lasted longest—Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia—the situation also dramatically intensified during the month of October. There, another 14 million people have to battle with the consequences of lack of food. And finally, the Western Sahel has now become a zone of crisis. Several million human beings in Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal are threatened.

Clear, early-warning announcements, sounding the alarm on the developing catastrophe, have been given since the beginning of 2002 by the United Nations Organization. At first, these concerned Southern Africa. Already in February, the FAO spoke of 4 million people who, because of very bad weather conditions in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Angola, had to expect the widespread failure of the next harvest. In May, they already were speaking of 10 million in danger; in June, of 12.8 million; and now, the report has risen to 14 million people. For Ethiopia in East Africa, the government gave out a warning in July, that its earlier warning that 5.2 million people would need food aid, had to be corrected upward to 8 million.

In mid-October, the World Food Program issued a press briefing with the alarming title, “Disaster Threatens: Millions More Ethiopians Menaced by Hunger.” The report cited the estimate of the UN chief representative in Ethiopia, Georgia Shaver, that 6 million people there had already had to turn to donated food aid, and that this number could rise to 10-14 million, in Ethiopia alone, by the beginning of 2003. At the same time, the Eritrean government warned that 1.5 million Eritreans would be stricken by the harvest losses due to drought conditions.

Now there are, in addition, further warnings for the Sahel zone. The failure of the normal rainfall, has left the harvests withered in large areas of Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal.

A Disaster Without Precedent

World Food Program spokeswoman Christiane Berthiaume explained that the UN Organization has never had to overcome so many severe crises, all at the same time. It has never encountered such a truly massive problem, she said, and donor countries were not responding in proportion to its dimensions. Meanwhile, the FAO has complained that, of the foodstuffs it requested in August for the crisis in Southern Africa, only 34% has been provided.

The immediate trigger of the crisis in most of the stricken areas, is a massive drought affecting countries whose economies have already collapsed under the dictates of the structural adjustment policy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and whose populations are already suffering the most bitter poverty, compounded by disease and malnutrition. Farmers are at the mercy of the drought, because there is no infrastructure by means of which the effects of drought can be combatted. They can only watch passively while their grain and pasture-land dries up.

This year, Malawi is bringing in the poorest harvest in more than 50 years. In Zambia, even last year, maize production was about 30% below normal. This year, in some areas, the harvest is completely wiped out. About 630,000 tons have been lost. In Zimbabwe, there is a deficit of up to 1.5 million tons of maize. Mountainous Lesotho, last Spring, was afflicted, not by drought, but by rain, frost, and hail, and that season’s harvest was diminished by nearly two-thirds. In Mozambique, after overwhelming floods had washed the fields out in the preceding two years, this year’s drought parched the grain on the stalk in southern and central Mozambique. Some peasants have not had a full harvest in three years.

The outlook in many parts of Ethiopia and Eritrea is similarly catastrophic. The drought there has led to the widespread loss of the maize and millet crops. The pasture-land was thereby lost, and drinking water has dried up for livestock, with cattling dying as a result. Hit especially hard in Ethiopia are the Afar region north of the capital Addis Abeba, the eastern part of Oromia, and several districts in the south, down to the northern border of Somalia.

In these stricken countries, there has developed, in addi-

tion, an awful dynamic of the combined catastrophes of food shortages and AIDS. HIV infection rates lie between 20% and 30% of the adult population.

The United Nations and World Food Program require about 1 million tons of foodstuffs from donors in the next four months in order to stop the African hunger disaster. That costs \$400 million, less than the United States and Great Britain are spending every few days for the preparations for their war in the Middle East.

World Grain Output, Stocks Fall

Worsening the lack of humanitarian response by the “donor community,” to supply food relief on the scale needed in Africa, is the grim situation of *worldwide* food production this year. World grain output and reserves are both declining dramatically. This all reflects the economic policy debacle in Western capitals. The latest harvest estimates from the Northern Hemisphere farm belts, made by the the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, document the trends.

Crop output has fallen more or less drastically in four of the world’s top six grain export centers: Canada, the United States, Argentina, and Australia (the other two are Germany and New Zealand). The decline reflects both the worsening economic conditions for farming—as in Argentina, which is suffering general economic collapse under IMF dictates—and the impact of drought, which is severely affecting crops in the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The Australian Grains Council announced in October, that their current harvest of winter crops will be down 50% from last crop year! On Oct. 28, Grains Council president Keith Perrett said he “doesn’t doubt” that the next year will see grain *imports* into the country, unprecedented in recent times. In the United States, 1,606 out of a total of 3,141 counties have been officially designated economic “disaster areas,” most for drought, and many of them in the High Plains farm belt.

The total grains output (all types) for the world (all nations) for the crop year 2002-03 is expected to be—at the best—1,814 million metric tons (mmt), well below each of the last two crop years—1,863 mmt in 2001-02, and 1,842 in 2000-01.

World grain stocks are going down accordingly, as output

African Nations in Worsening Food Crisis



30 million people in 13 countries in three different broad regions of Africa, are threatened with hunger and/or starvation as a result of failed economic dogma and drought. The crisis threatens to exceed all those of the past 30 years on the continent.

falls, while use of grain (directly for human consumption, or indirectly through the livestock chain) continues to rise—although not nearly at the rate it would be if decent nutrition and food relief were being provided for millions of people now going hungry. The world year-ending reserve levels (carry-over at the end of the crop year) have been falling dramatically: from 501 mmt in 2000-01; to 461 mmt in 2001-02; to 371 mmt in 2002-03.

Global stocks are declining for all three major grain types: wheat, rice, and coarse grains (such as maize and sorghum). For example, the projected year-ending stocks of wheat worldwide have fallen from 169 million metric tons in 2000-01, down to an expected 131 million metric tons—which will be the lowest in over 20 years. World carry-over of coarse grains in 2000-01 was 187 mmt, and for 2002-03 is projected to be only 134 mmt.