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Zimbabwe: The Humanitarian Crisis Report

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A report by the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, Solidarity Peace Trust and Amandla Publishers.

Executive Summary

By the end of 2008, 45% of Zimbabwe's population will be at risk of starvation. Currently, at least two million people need urgent food assistance. The United Nations has reported that maize production in Zimbabwe for 2008 was estimated at 575 000 tons - an estimated deficit of around 1 million tons.

Shops are now empty of Zimbabwe's staple, maize meal.

In a letter dated June 4, 2008, the Zimbabwean government instructed all international aid agencies and local NGOs to suspend their fieldwork. As a result, humanitarian aid to Zimbabwe's poorest and most vulnerable people has come to a halt.

Now, more than 2 months after the official suspension directive, the government has still not lifted the ban, prompting serious concerns of a humanitarian catastrophe given that the country's food production for the just ended harvest is the worst the country has seen in at least 15 years.

Desperately hungry citizens are now running out of survival options.

- Those with nothing to sell are resorting to eating whatever wild fruits they can get hold of.
- Rural people are selling off their livestock for cash to buy food.
- In rural areas in the southern provinces there are increasing reports of desperate families marrying off their underage girls to elderly well-off men in return for food and general support.
- Said an elderly lady from the Harare high-density township of Mbare: "If we do not get assistance soon, we may just have to all resort to begging in the streets".

This report is based on interviews undertaken in Musina and Johannesburg in South Africa and Harare in Zimbabwe during the period of July 27 to August 13, 2008.

1 Background

1.1 *Suspension of NGO humanitarian field work*

Aid agencies have been forced to suspend all fieldwork in Zimbabwe on the orders of the government. A letter issued on June 4th by the Zimbabwean Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare instructed all PVOs / NGOs "to suspend all field operation until further notice". This was due to government concerns that NGOs and humanitarian agencies aided the MDC campaign with their relief efforts. The ban applies to both local Zimbabwean NGOs, and international aid agencies.

The day before [June 3], Zimonline had reported that 'Social Welfare Minister Nicholas Goche on Monday told ZimOnline that the government had banned Care International from giving further assistance to needy communities in Masvingo province while the Harare administration probes the humanitarian organisation for allegedly using aid to campaign for the opposition¹.' The same report quotes that minister as having said; "Several other non-governmental organisations involved in food distribution in Manicaland province will also be asked to cease operations while we investigate them . . . there is a crucial runoff coming and our information indicates that NGOs are involved in plans to undermine our candidate."

Though the Zimbabwean government announced a partial lifting of the ban during the first week of August permitting the resumption of feeding programs for HIV/AIDS patients, the wider NGO distribution ban remains in effect and continues to block the flow of food aid to an increasingly distressed population.

The suspension of humanitarian operations is estimated to have put the lives of more than 1.5 million marginalised Zimbabweans at risk already. Without the immediate resumption of food aid across the country, widespread hunger and worsening malnutrition are unavoidable.

On 8 August a statement issued in Harare and signed by diplomats from 11 leading donor countries - Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, the United States and the European Commission - expressed concern that restrictions on aid agencies were still in place two weeks after the July 21 agreement, which pledged that humanitarian assistance would be restored.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed on 21 July between Zimbabwe's political parties states that they "will work together to ensure ...that humanitarian and social welfare organisations are enabled to render such assistance as might be required."

"The magnitude of the humanitarian crisis requires immediate and unconditional lifting of the suspension on all NGO (non-governmental organisations) operations.

¹ <http://www.zimonline.co.za/Article.aspx?ArticleId=3249>

Harassment of NGOs must cease immediately, and protection of humanitarian workers must be guaranteed," said the diplomats in a statement.

"We feel a sense of responsibility to sound the warning about the coming emergency. Because the government has not responded to our July 29 diplomatic appeal for full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access and restored humanitarian space, we feel we must now raise the profile of this issue publicly".

1.2 Humanitarian Situation

The WFP and FAO reestimate that 2,04 million Zimbabweans in rural and urban areas do not currently have enough food. This figure is set to rise to 3.8 million people by October. By January 2009, the estimates 5.1 million will be at risk of starvation. This is approximately 45% of the population.

The humanitarian crisis is not limited to food – water and sanitation services are also affected as some of the aid agencies were involved in providing these services. The lack of support in the provision of water, inspecially in urban areas, may lead to widespread disease outbreaks which will particularly affect people living with HIV and AIDS.

Worsening the situation is Zimbabwe's inflation rate, the highest in the world, officially reported to be over 2.2 million % by the end of July this year, though independent analysts put the figure above 10 million %. Government is out of cash to import food, and many families that would normally be able to buy their own food supplies are unable to do so because of an increasingly worthless currency and unavailability of supplies.

The fragile humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe has been further compounded by yet another year of poor agricultural production. The joint FAO and WFP Crop CFSAM undertaken in April / May 2008 estimates the deficit in cereals at 1.232 million tons as the expected harvest for the year at is only 838 000 tons; about 40% of the national needs for 2008/2009.

A recent survey by the Centre for Community Development in Zimbabwe (CCDZ) indicates that many families are adopting survival strategies which include eating one meal per day. Although most of the country's provinces are critically hit by the ongoing food shortages, the situation is worst in Masvingo, Matebeleland North and South, Manicaland and parts of the Midlands.

2 Politics of Food in Zimbabwe

2.1 *Political control of food distribution*

The politicisation of food distribution in Zimbabwe goes back many years, even before the recent food shortages following the 2000 land re-distribution exercise that is now considered the many cause of the country's fall from breadbasket to basket case. The government has always maintained a stranglehold on food distribution with a view to ensuring that those receiving the food associate this generosity with the government, rather than the donors. This is even more so during periods leading up to elections. And Zimbabweans have been holding elections on one form or another quite frequently with 6 major elections held over the last 8 years; constitutional referendum of February 2000, parliamentary elections of June 2000, presidential elections of 2002, parliamentary elections of 2005, Senatorial elections of 2006 and the harmonized elections of 2008. Others include local government elections and ad-hoc parliamentary by-elections.

The ruling party presidential candidate told an election rally on 29 May that his government had brought 600,000mt of maize from its neighbour, South Africa, to alleviate the country's now chronic food shortages. But very little of this reported imported maize is in evidence in country where desperately hungry citizens are reportedly running out of survival options. Shops are empty of the staple maize meal. The little that is available is found in the black market where purchases are usually made in hard currency with a 10 kg bag going for 30 South African rands in Harare this week.

The MDC made the issue of the lifting of the suspension of humanitarian work one of their preconditions for engaging in the political negotiations stating that "the reinstatement of access by humanitarian organizations to the people of Zimbabwe in order to provide food, medical and other critical services throughout the country". But, evidently, this was not done and the negotiations commenced towards the end of July without this precondition being met.

An elderly lady from the Harare high-density township of Mbare lamented the suspension of the monthly food hamper she had been receiving from a local NGO. "The hamper was meeting more than half of my family's food requirements. Now we sometimes just have salted cooked vegetables from our little garden established with assistance from the NGO. If we do not get assistance soon, we may just have to all resort to begging in the streets". The hamper she referred to consisted of 20 kgs of meal mealie, 2 kgs of dry beans, 750 ml of cooking oil, 375 ml peanut butter and 500 grams of salt. A 2007 evaluation by a group of Zimbabwean NGOs had indicated that the staple maize meal was lasting beneficiaries 20 days and 17 days respectively in Harare and Bulawayo. This assistance stopped after the suspension of all humanitarian agencies' field work.

Meanwhile, interviewees in Mbare reported that they had been registered by the authorities for the government's National Basic Commodities Supply Enhancement Programme (Bacossi). The hampers consist of 2kgs each of rice, flour and sugar,

a 750ml bottle of cooking oil, a packet of candles, toothpaste, bathing and washing soap, Vaseline, powdered milk and sanitary pads, all for a revalued Z\$10. But, probably as an indication of supply problems, maize meal is not included in the Bacossi hamper. Intended recipients interviewed in Mbare have not to date received this food aid.

Recent independent media reports indicated that these cheap Bacossi food hampers are mostly being sold to ruling party supporters. The project is run by the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe and has not gone down well with local manufacturers who feel that the foreign currency should have been made available for them to import raw materials so that they can use up their production capacity, currently reported at less than 20%, instead of importing these commodities.

The little food that is available through the state owned Grain Marketing Board (GMB) is reportedly being sold selectively to ruling party supporters through their networks; usually compliant village headmen and chiefs whose instructions are to identify and allow supporters of ZANU PF to access the available food at the official prices. The rest, most opposition supporters, have to rely on the parallel market through which those 'connected', usually local officials like the police, sell the maize meal for hard currency (usually South African rands or US dollars) or parallel market local currency equivalent.

2.2 *Coping mechanisms*

Some of the coping mechanisms talked about by former beneficiaries of food aid provided by aid agencies include petty trading, especially by those in urban centers. Some families in high-density townships are selling vegetables, cigarettes and small items outside their houses. But such activities sometimes attract official and 'quasi-official' police raids resulting in confiscation of the wares.

Those in rural areas are less fortunate as there are limited sources of food. Those with some livestock are selling whatever they can in order to raise the cash needed to buy food, but with retail shops empty of food items, they have to resort to the black market for purchases at exorbitant prices. Some even resort to exchanging their livestock for food. Reports of bartering taking place in the villages, like exchanging maize for chickens, goats or even cows. But most of those with cattle prefer selling them for hard currency, which they then use to buy maize, with a 50 kg bucket going for as much as a hundred South African rands.

Those with nothing to sell are resorting to eating whatever wild fruits they can get hold of. Reports of the revival of the tradition of child brides under which desperate families marry off their underage girls to elderly well-off men in return for food and general support are now commonplace in rural areas in the southern provinces.

A young man from Berejena in the Chivi district of Masvingo reported that he had left his village and crossed at Beit Bridge on July 4. To do that, he had sold an ox for one thousand two hundred rands, part of which he used to buy two 50 kg bags of maize for his two young brothers who stayed behind to look after their home.

The maize was bought from a local policeman for R200. He then left his brothers R300 with strict instructions to only use when absolutely necessary; buying food once they ran out.

2.3 *Impact on beneficiaries*

A noticeable impact of the suspension of humanitarian field work, especially food distribution, is the increase in the influx of young people leaving the country for neighbouring countries, especially South Africa. The Star newspaper reported on July 24 that "the number of people arriving at the Crown Mines Refugee reception area in Johannesburg had leapt from 800 a day to more than 5 000 a day in the past month" and "the bulk of those people seeking documents are Zimbabwean." Some of these immigrants interviewed in Musina and Johannesburg indicated that they were left with no choice, but to leave Zimbabwe as they had run out of food. The majority of these recent immigrants came from the border provinces of Masvingo and Matabeleland and the southern districts of the Midlands province where food production is lowest.

Interviews with former food aid beneficiaries in Mberengwa indicated that some are going for days without food as most of the villagers had harvested very little to nothing this year. Even before the ban, aid agencies were only feeding the elderly and disabled who did not own anything. If any of the villagers have an animal; a cow, goats or chickens, they would be disqualified from receiving handouts as they are expected to use these for their sustenance.

The loss of food aid agencies food hampers to some of the beneficiaries living in poor urban townships is catastrophic as they now have to find ways to survive. "The 20 kgs meal mealie enabled us to have something to eat for at least once a day. Now we sometimes go for days without sadza (maize meal stiff porridge) to eat" were the words of one woman in Mbare.

2.4 *Impact on NGOs and aid agencies*

Faced with government silence, a number of NGOs involved with humanitarian work closed their field offices as cost cutting measures and also due to inactivity. The forced suspension of field work by NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance has meant that most of them have laid off their field staff, worsening the already high unemployment rates in the country estimated at over 80%.

A young lady who was working for one such field office of an international organisation based in the mining town of Zvishavane indicated that she was laid off on July 7 and told that she would be contacted once the organisation was allowed to resume its fieldwork. After staying at home for 2 weeks and with the prospects of her return to work diminishing, she sold off her mobile phone line and handset for South African rands, gave some of the money to her sister for her to continue paying for her one room lodgings before using the rest of the money to find her way to Johannesburg. She still keeps in touch with some of her former colleagues just in case their former employer resumes their operations. She was

concerned about how long she will be able to maintain her lodgings. She also hoped that she would be able to get some work in Johannesburg that would enable her to send back enough money to keep up with her rentals.

2.5 *The future: immediate needs and recovery*

The ban means that vital assessments to investigate food needs cannot take place. Plans to deliver seeds and other agricultural inputs for the next season are now on hold, which has implications for food security and availability for the next year.

In addition, NGOs have been obliged to halt work involving training and support to farmers, supplementary food production in urban areas, public health programmes, programmes combating HIV and AIDS, and combating gender-based violence.

It is critical that the Zimbabwe government immediately lift the suspension of field operations by aid agencies so that they can start operating. Given the lead time required to bring in imported maize for distribution and agricultural inputs for the new planting season, the government needs to act shiftily to avert a very serious humanitarian catastrophe from worsen next year.

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