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Food Shortages Are Looming in Zimbabwe

By Staff Reporter

Zimbabwe's government is blaming grain millers for food shortages, while the millers are laying the blame on government's failure to supply them with grain.

By law all grain harvested has to be delivered to the state-owned Grain Marketing Board (GMB), which then distributes it to millers. Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's government has repeatedly denied that the country was facing food shortages, but the mathematics suggest otherwise.

Zimbabwe's annual cereal requirement is about 1 923 390 tons. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation estimate for maize production in the 2005/06 agricultural season was 1.2 million tons, with Zimbabwe's Central Statistical Office predicting that plot-farmers would harvest about 328 300 tons, a total of 1 528 300 tons, leaving a deficit of 395 000 tons.

GMB chief executive officer Samuel Muvhuti said they still expected at least 900 000 tons of grain from farmers, but refused to reveal how much had been delivered to date, while the state media reported recently that the GMB had so far only managed to collect 220 000 tons of maize.

There is no maize

Millers said the failure by the marketing board to supply grain was causing acute maize meal shortages in the second city of Bulawayo, and the semi-arid provinces of Matabeleland North and South.

"I have rummaged through the city in the past three days looking for maize meal, but to no avail. I am really worried, because our supplies as a family are fast running out," said Bulawayo resident Lizwe Dube.

Head of the Grain Millers Association (GMA) in Bulawayo, Thembinkosi Ndlovu, told IRIN: "For the past two weeks we have not been allocated maize by the GMB and, as a result, have not been able to produce maize meal. The truth of the matter is that there is no maize."

Themba Sibanda, a medium-scale farmer in the north, said he was withholding his produce "in case there are permanent shortages".

Muvhuti has ordered an investigation into allegations of corruption at the marketing board, and accused grain millers of trading on the parallel market. However, he acknowledged that there were problems with imports from South African-based maize suppliers, which were being held up at the border. Between April last year and March this year, Zimbabwe imported more than

900 000 tons of maize to close the food shortage gap.

A GMA official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said "the maize meal shortages are not a surprise development at all because the GMB has no grain; government even knows that. We have been to many parts of the country, including the rural areas, and we have discovered that there is nothing in the shops - actually, some have not been able to get any deliveries from millers in the past three weeks."

Government is bankrupt

Eddie Cross, a policy adviser and economist for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party, said grain delays at the border were related to outstanding debts owed to suppliers, including countries such as Argentina and South Africa. Zimbabwe's total external debt amounts to about US\$5.5 billion.

"The government is bankrupt, and corrupt employees at GMB are taking the little that comes in," Cross alleged. "Hard-pressed Zimbabweans are relying 100% on the black market for basic foodstuffs, which the government cannot buy. By blaming the millers for the shortage, government has again resorted to its scape-goating tactics. Zimbabweans know that the problem is with the government and the GMB."

Zimbabwe is experiencing an economic meltdown, with unemployment in excess of 70% and inflation hovering at 1 000% annually.

MDC shadow minister for agriculture Renson Gasela, a former GMB general manager, said the situation was being compounded by government's refusal to acknowledge that there was a food crisis.

"The government misled the humanitarian community when it predicted harvests of more than 1.8 tons, now they cannot admit to the crisis. There is no bumper harvest - in fact, farmers have delivered less than 750 000 tons to the GMB," said Gasela.

"There is nothing more coming so we have to survive on imports, but we cannot secure them without hard currency. Government has accumulated huge debts - no one wants to trade on terms with Zimbabwe because of the GMB's record of erratic payment."

According to the latest food security analysis by the United States-based Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET), poor families were facing a deepening, multifaceted food crisis.

"Poor urban households and rural households in staple cereal deficit areas are likely to face serious difficulties in accessing food, due to the ever-rising cost of living in general, and the escalating costs of food in particular.

A significant proportion of rural and urban households dependent on the market for their food do not earn enough to purchase the minimum basket. The minimum monthly wage rate for the commercial sector in June could only cover about 40% of the total cost of the minimum food

basket for June 2006," the report said.

The situation is set to worsen. "Food insecurity is likely to deteriorate again as the hunger season peaks between September 2006 and January 2007, especially in cereal deficit areas," FEWSNET said.

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