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ZIMBABWE: Govt says no need for aid despite foodshortages

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of theUnited Nations]

JOHANNESBURG, 8 July (IRIN) - Despite an estimated 4.5million Zimbabweans needing food aid this year, the government insists there isno need to launch an official appeal for international assistance.

"No state of disaster will be declared, and there areno plans to appeal for food aid," Leonard Turugari of the ministry ofpublic service, labour and social welfare, told delegates at a regional foodsecurity meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa, on Friday.

The two-day gathering of government representatives, UNagencies and NGOs from the region aimed to tackle specific challenges arisingfrom a decline in agricultural production in recent years.

Several southern African countries are entering a fourthyear of food shortages and the UN World Food Programme says it needs US \$266million to assist more than 10 million vulnerable people across the region.

Turugari said his government had the capacity to import1.2 million mt of maize, the staple grain, in the coming months, to make up for a shortfall in national output. He attributed the downturn in production to lingering drought conditions and economic difficulties.

Although there were no plans on the table to ask theinternational community to step in and kick-start a general food distributionprogramme, Turugari said the "door was not closed to donors". NGOs could continue giving assistance to the vulnerable, provided they worked "within their mandates".

International NGOs operating in Zimbabwe have come underfire from the government for allegedly using food aid to campaign for theopposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC); on the other hand, the MDC hasclaimed that the government used food as a political weapon by withholding it from perceived opponents.

When asked if there was a guarantee that the 1.2 millionmt of imported maize, which is to be distributed by the state-controlled GrainMarketing Board, would be channelled to the most vulnerable, Turugari saidthere was "no evidence to the contrary".

He also commented that, contrary to reports, the scarcityof basic commodities was due to producers hoarding essential items.