
RI BULLETIN

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Sudan: Food Shortages Spreading Beyond Conflict Areas

Sudan is facing a severe food shortage that extends far beyond war-torn Darfur and exceeds the World Food Program's current resources. Only a quick increase in food pledges for drought afflicted areas throughout the country will avoid an increase in malnutrition.

Both Sudanese and UN officials have estimated that this year's harvest was 28% below normal, mainly because of a low rainfall during last year's summer planting season. "This is a country in trouble," says a top official in Sudan's Ministry of Agriculture. "Eastern Sudan is just as affected as Western Sudan," where two years of vicious fighting in Darfur has displaced nearly two million from their village and farms.

This year the WFP estimates that it will need about 720,000 metric tons to feed 5.6 million people in Sudan, of whom 2.3 million are in Darfur. "This will be a difficult year," says a WFP official in Khartoum. So far the WFP has pledged for about 54% of the food it needs in Darfur this year, but pledges for only about 10% of the food it expects to need in southern Sudan. Without an increase in food commitments, WFP anticipates to run out of food at the end of March for the South, Eastern and Central regions of Sudan. If new commitments are not made for Darfur, food could run out this summer.

Moreover, the food needs in southern Sudan could rise sharply if larger than expected numbers of refugees and internally displaced people decide to return following the signing of a peace agreement last month. That agreement formally ended a 21-year civil war between the government in the north and rebel groups in the south. During the war, two million people died, about 500,000 fled the country to refugee camps in neighboring nations and four million moved to other parts of Sudan, at least half them to the capital and areas surrounding Khartoum.

The war in the south drove people from their farms, slowed the growth of cattle and other livestock herds and reduced food production. Just as that war was winding down, another rebellion flared up in Darfur in western Sudan. In just two years, that war has displaced about two million people and sharply lowered production of both crops and livestock, a staple of the Sudanese agricultural economy. Last year, for instance, the annual market of some 10,000 cattle in South Darfur did not occur, depriving herders of income from cattle sales.

But the projected shortfalls reflect more than war and displacement. Last year's rainfall was lower than usual in most parts of the country during the summer growing season. Last year was "one of the worst rainy seasons in the past 50 years," says an official in the Ministry of Agriculture.

Particular market factors also played a role. The country boasted a bumper harvest in 2003. Sudan harvested 6.3 million metric tons, which was about 1.1 million more than it consumes in an average year. Sudanese and UN officials say that farmers sold about half the surplus to feed and fatten livestock. As a result livestock exports were strong in 2003. The rest was stored, about 40% by the government and the balance by private farmers and traders. Much of the surplus was sorghum, a Sudanese staple. As a result farmers tended to

reduce sorghum planting last year, choosing instead to plant more acres of sesame seeds, peanuts and other cash crops. But the lower than expected rainfall hit these farmers with a double whammy: the output of cash crops was lower than expected, and the stunted sorghum output drove up prices, meaning that they are having to pay more for this staple.

The Sudanese government—including the Ministry of Agriculture itself—is divided on the severity of the problem. “We need to make plans for the purchase of one million tons of grain,” says one top official in the Ministry. Other agency officials disagree, and the Ministry of Finance is not willing to pay for more food now. Announcement of government plans to buy more grain would drive down prices, making it easier for consumers. A year ago, sorghum sold for \$131 a metric ton, now it is selling for about \$280 a ton, and the WFP recently purchased 22, 000 tons of Sudanese sorghum for \$288 a ton. Higher prices hit poor people the most.

Over the last two years, the WFP has worked hard and successfully to increase food shipments to Darfur, where it estimates it will have to feed 2.3 million displaced and war-afflicted people this year. Thanks to these deliveries, “We are on top of the humanitarian situation. The malnutrition rate is way down,” says an official at the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Khartoum. In fact, he says, the rate has fallen to 8% to 10% in Kalma, one of the largest camps for internally displaced near Nyala, far less than the normal rate of 20% to 25% in parts of Darfur. The WFP ration of grains, proteins and oils is richer than many Darfurians were used to before the war. This disparity is attracting people to camps. As a result, the WFP is drafting plans to distribute more food to people in villages so they won’t congregate in camps.

Until recently, heavy fighting and increasing banditry in Darfur made it difficult for WFP shipments to reach large numbers of people outside of camps. However, a current lull in the fighting, plus improved patrols by the African Union force in Darfur, is opening more areas to food deliveries.

But several factors could derail this progress. First, the WFP says that it doesn’t currently have enough food in the pipeline to pre-position all the food it needs for the rainy season, when muddy roads make transportation and deliveries difficult. Second, a combination of drought and conflict are interfering with the normal migration routes of herds of cattle, goats and camels. As a result water holes and grazing areas are being dangerously overused, and herds are becoming more vulnerable. Finally, unless the war ends soon, allowing people to start returning to their farms before the planting season in June, “We will have to feed these people until November 2006,” and maybe beyond, says the OCHA official. Jan Egeland, the UN emergency coordinator, warns that if security worsens and the drought continues, starvation could be catastrophic. If recent skirmishes outside of Darfur in the Kordofan and Red Sea states intensify, the difficulty of getting food to Darfur will rise, as will food needs if new fighting brings more displacement.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- All parties to the conflict in Darfur intensify their efforts to end the fighting. A recent lull in the fighting, plus a new round of diplomacy, could offer a foundation for an effective cease fire followed by a peace.
- Donors respond immediately with the funds and food stocks needed in order for WFP to meet Sudan’s food needs.
- The WFP proceed with plans to broaden food distribution in Darfur so more people will stay in their villages rather than flocking to camps.
- The Government of Sudan, which has increasing oil wealth, buy more food on the open market and develop a more effective method for stockpiling food during surplus times and distributing it during deficit times.

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