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FLOODS AND ERRATIC RAINS CAUSE EXTENSIVE DAMAGE IN PARTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

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OVERVIEW

The worst floods for four decades have devastated parts of Southern Africa, leaving thousands homeless and seriously threatening food supplies. Damage to housing, property and infrastructure has also been extensive, which will require substantial assistance to rehabilitate. The situation varies from country to country, but the rains have generally been erratic since the beginning of the season. In some areas, excessive rainfall was received, whilst in others there were prolonged dry spells. Torrential rains in the first

dekad of February in Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana and Swaziland, resulted in loss of life and severe damage to housing and infrastructure. An assessment of crop damage is not yet available but significant losses are anticipated in the worst affected areas.

Mozambique has borne the brunt of severe floods, where some 300 000 people have already been affected. However, this number is expected to rise substantially, following cyclone "Eline" which has just hit the country. The Government of Mozambique has appealed for US\$ 2.7 million in international assistance to cope with the emergency. WFP is currently distributing emergency food aid to 150 000 people in the country. In South Africa, the number of people left homeless is provisionally estimated at 100 000 and in Botswana at 4 000. No assessment is yet available for Swaziland. In Lesotho, abundant rains in early February brought relief to crops stressed by previous dry weather but may have been too late to prevent a reduction in yields. In contrast, more rains are needed in Malawi, Namibia, Madagascar and Zambia, where precipitation in February has been below average. In Zimbabwe, while growing conditions are satisfactory due to favourable rains since the beginning of the season, maize production is likely to be affected by a reduction in area planted due to diversion of land to more profitable crops. The food supply situation is tight for large numbers of vulnerable people in the urban areas of the country, due to high levels of inflation and fuel shortages. The food situation remains extremely serious in war-affected Angola, where emergency food aid continues to be necessary for some 1.1 million displaced people, as well as for large numbers of Angolan refugees in Zambia and Namibia.

Although it is too early to estimate the impact of floods and insufficient rains on regional crop production, there are fears of a significant drop in cereal production and the emergence of food shortages in the worst affected areas. FAO's Global Information and Early Warning System is closely monitoring the situation and will mount in April 2000, jointly with WFP, Crop and Food Supply Assessment Missions to the most seriously affected countries.

COUNTRY DETAILS

Mozambique

Torrential rains since the beginning of February in the south of the country have resulted in the worst floods for decades, causing a number of deaths and considerable damage to infrastructure and housing. Many towns have become isolated due to the destruction of roads and bridges, while continuous rains are hindering evacuation and relief operations. As a result of contamination of drinking water, diseases such as malaria and cholera are feared in the coming weeks. Some 300 000 people are already severely affected by the floods, but the number is rising. The worst affected area is the province of Maputo; the number of displaced people in Maputo, the capital city, and Matola town is estimated at 150 000. The Government has appealed for US\$2.7 million in international assistance to cope with the emergency but this amount does not include the cost of food assistance. WFP is currently distributing emergency food aid to 150 000 persons in the country.

The outlook for this year's cereal harvest is poor. Anticipated crop losses in southern parts will add to planting reductions due to erratic and highly localized rains since the beginning of the season in November. An assessment of the agricultural and crop losses is underway. However, preliminary indications point to an urgent need for seeds and tools to increase plantings profiting from water recession.

Botswana

Torrential rains from 7 to 9 February, which in southern areas were equivalent to three quarters of the annual precipitation, resulted in the worst floods in 30 years, causing loss of life and severe damage to infrastructure and housing. The country's main roads and railway have been cut in several places. Preliminary assessments indicate that 25 000 people have been affected and some 4 000 homes destroyed. An evaluation of the damage to agriculture is not yet available but crop losses are reported in several areas. The outlook for the 2000 cereal crops, mostly sorghum, is uncertain.

The food situation is difficult for people who have lost their property and for those who remain isolated by floodwaters. The Government is providing emergency assistance to people left homeless and has appealed for humanitarian assistance, including tents, blankets and food rations. However, overall, the food supply situation is stable reflecting the commercial import capacity of the country.

Swaziland

Torrential rains in the first dekad of February resulted in floods, with rivers bursting their banks. Loss of life and extensive damage to roads, bridges, and housing are reported. Drinking water shortages are being experienced in the capital city Mbabane. An assessment of the damage to agriculture is not yet available as fields are still waterlogged. Prospects for the 1999/2000 maize crops are uncertain. Precipitation during the early part of the rainy season had been generally adequate but the floods are likely to have negatively affected crops at a critical development stage.

Lesotho

Prospects for the 1999/2000 cereal crops, to be harvested from May, are uncertain. Abundant rains in the first dekad of February provided relief to the 1999/2000 cereal crops stressed by below average precipitation in January, but they may have arrived too late to present reductions in yields. Rains started late and have been irregular to date.

The 1999 wheat crop is estimated at 14 000 tonnes, half the level earlier anticipated, reflecting the adverse effect of the dry spell on the crop. The output of the 1999 coarse grains has also been revised downwards to 158 000 tonnes, but is still 12 percent above the reduced production of the previous year.

The food supply situation remains stable following adequate levels of commercial imports.

South Africa

Heavy rains in the north of the country during the first dekad of February resulted in floods, causing loss of life and damage to housing and infrastructure. Several towns have become isolated and an estimated 100 000 persons have been left homeless by floods. Worst affected areas are the Northern, Mpumalanga and Guateng provinces. Preliminary estimates for the Northern Province alone indicate the cost of the infrastructure damage at US \$33 million. An estimate of the agricultural damage is not yet available.

Despite anticipated localized crop losses, the abundant rains of early February are likely to have benefited the maize crop stressed by below average precipitation in the second

and third dekads of January in central areas. However, the outcome of the season will depend on the behaviour of the weather in the coming weeks. Preliminary estimates of the area planted to maize point to an increase of 10 percent from last year, due to diversion of land from other crops. Latest official estimates indicate a 1999 wheat output of 1.52 million tonnes, slightly less than the previous year's below-average crop. This mainly reflects diversion of land to more profitable crops, but also reduced yields in some areas.

The food situation is difficult for a large number of people who have lost their properties or are isolated by the floods. However, the overall food supply situation remains satisfactory. Despite the reduced coarse grain harvest of last year, commercial imports of maize, wheat and rice are adequate to cover needs.

Angola

The outlook for the 2000 cereal crops is uncertain. Generally good rains since the beginning of the season have provided adequate soil conditions for planting and crop development, despite localized floods in early January in southern areas. However, persistent displacement of the population by the civil war, which escalated in recent months, is negatively affecting production.

Fighting has intensified in recent months along the southern border with Namibia and in many other areas of the province of Kuando Kubango. The number of Angolan refugees in Namibia has increased to 9 000, while in the eastern border with Zambia the number of refugees has reached 170 000. Insecurity incidents are also reported from Huila, Huambo and Benguela provinces.

The food situation is particularly critical for the internally displaced population, estimated at 2 million. Malnutrition is on the increase in this population and daily deaths from starvation have been reported from Coconda municipality in Huila and from other areas. However, persistent insecurity hampers access to this needy population in many areas, including Andulo of Bie, Kuando Kubango, Kuito, Moxico and Zaire.

Food aid is being provided to some 1.1 million people, including 6 000 affected by the recent floods. Against an overall food aid requirement of 180 000 tonnes of cereals for the 1999/2000 marketing year (April/March), 123 000 tonnes had been pledged by end-January, of which 100 000 tonnes have been delivered.

Madagascar

The outlook for the 1999/2000 rice crop is unfavourable. After a good start of the rainy season in November, below-average precipitation from the third dekad of December to the first dekad of February in the main growing areas in the north has resulted in planting and yield reductions. In the important growing region of Lac Alaotra, only 20- 25 percent of the area normally under rice has been cultivated this season. Paddy production is forecast to decline from the good level of 1999.

The food supply situation is satisfactory reflecting the 1999 good cereal harvest, particularly in the structurally deficit areas of the south.

Malawi

Prospects for the 1999/2000 maize crop are uncertain, reflecting erratic and patchy rains since the beginning of the season. After good rains in November, which favoured planting operations and benefited early-planted crops, a prolonged dry spell during December, particularly in the main growing areas in the south, severely stressed developing crops. Widespread rains received in the first half of January provided relief to the moisture-stressed crops, but were too late in some areas where yield reductions are anticipated. Dry weather resumed in the third dekad of January and irregular precipitation in early February may have further reduced yields.

The overall food supply situation remains satisfactory following the record cereal crop of last year, which resulted in an exportable surplus and a substantial increase in maize stocks. Food prices remain stable.

Namibia

After a good start to the rainy season, prospects for the 2000 maize and sorghum crops have deteriorated as a result of a one-month dry spell in northern growing areas. More precipitation is needed to avoid yield reductions. Pastures and livestock are reported in good condition following earlier good rains.

The 2000 wheat crop is estimated to be average at 5 000 tonnes.

The food supply situation remains stable reflecting an increase in production last year and the country's import capacity.

Zambia

Prospects for the 1999/2000 cereal crops are uncertain. Rains have been irregular and patchy since the beginning of the season, with prolonged dry spells in December and January. Widespread rains are needed soon to prevent reductions in yields.

Estimates of the 1999 wheat crop have been revised downward to 90 000 tonnes, but this is still 27 percent up on the previous year.

The food supply situation remains generally stable as a result of a recovery in the 1999 maize production and a good harvest of non-cereal crops.

Heavy fighting in southeast Angola between government forces and UNITA rebels in recent weeks has raised fears of a fresh refugee influx into Zambia, where around 170 000 Angolans have already arrived.

Zimbabwe

Normal to above-normal rains in the first dekad of February provided relief to the 1999/2000 cereal crops stressed by dry weather in late January. Although rains have been erratic since the beginning of the season, growing conditions are generally adequate for the developing crops. However, the outlook for the harvest is poor as a result of a decline in the planted area. This is mainly due to a widespread dry spell in December that adversely affected sowing. It also reflects diversion of land from maize to other crops following reduced support prices for maize, coupled with high prices and low availability of agricultural inputs. The 1999 wheat crop, harvested last November, was estimated record at 320 000 tonnes. The increase reflected higher plantings and yields.

The overall food supply situation is satisfactory following production recovery last year and adequate levels of maize imports. However, prices are reported on the increase in deficit areas, as well as in urban areas.

This report is prepared on the responsibility of the FAO Secretariat with information from official and unofficial sources. Since conditions may change rapidly, please contact Mr. Abdur Rashid, Chief, ESCG, FAO, (Fax: 0039-06-5705-4495, E-Mail (INTERNET): GIEWS1@FAO.ORG) for further information if required.

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