

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Drought and the politics of hunger

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Dear Peter:

In the notoriously poor Zambezi Valley of northern Zimbabwe, people now eat a murky brown porridge of baobab fruit and silt sifted from dry river beds. The most severe drought of the century in Southern Africa has destroyed their harvests. Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe has declared a national emergency and promised that no one will starve, but many people are going hungry. Some of the worst suffering is in the valley's holiday resort town of Kariba, but out of sight from the tourist hotels.

About 250 families live in a shantytown on the outskirts of town, where they were dumped during the government's "clean up" frenzy before last year's commonwealth summit here. Locals call the squatter camp "Tatambura," which means "we suffer hardship" in the local Shona language. Others call it "Baghdad," after Iraq's bombed-out capital. Newcomers from the countryside crouch in cardboard shelters alongside the ramshackle "permanent" shacks of wood and corrugated tin. Twelve filthy toilets serve the community of 3,000 people. Flu and diarrhoea are rampant.

Desperation shows in the faces of settlement residents. Although many squatters are employed as domestic laborers or work in the fish processing factories on the shores of Lake Kariba, they don't earn enough money to buy food at fast-rising prices. Sometimes they go for days without a meal. Official assistance seemed to have bypassed this human dumping-ground, so the Kariba Community Church began a "feeding program" in the camp last month. "We're doing this purely on humanitarian grounds," said church spokesman Paul Nhemachena.

More than 1,000 children under the age of five have been fed so far and more than \$3,000 Zim dollars worth of cooked food has been distributed. Several hundred infants might have died if not for the church's swift action, Nhemachena said. The soup kitchen program, however, may be terminated by local politicians.

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The Kariba town council dislikes initiatives they don't control. They see the church's work as a threat to Zimbabwe's ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front. The council, of course, is dominated by party members.

Sunfall Gawa, the deputy chairman of the Kariba Town Council, called the church's charity work "politically damaging." He questioned whether the church members might be an opposition party buying votes from the electorate for the 1995 elections. Gawa, a ZANU (PF) provincial youth league secretary, is threatening to shut down the program until proper channels are used to gain approval for the relief work. Gawa sounds paranoid because he knows ZANU (PF) faces growing popular dissatisfaction.

Thousands of layoffs, shortages of staples like sugar and corn flour (called mealie meal here in Zimbabwe), and tremendous inflation have resulted from both the drought and the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment program. This economic reform exercise in promoting "market forces" by trimming state involvement in the economy has been christened an "Economic" SAP, or ESAP, to avoid negative associations with the acronym for the hated South African Police.

The IMF's "belt-tightening exercise" has, among other things, led to the partial removal of subsidies from food production and pushed some food prices up by more than 100 percent. The price of bread jumped by two-thirds, while mealie meal now costs 50 percent more than it did last month. Murmurs of discontent among the people have swelled to vocal outcries against further hikes. In these rocky times, government officials view the actions of any organized independent group, even a church, as a disguised challenge to ZANU (PF).

Many Zimbabweans now doubly blame the government for imposing unpopular cutbacks that hurt the poor and for being unprepared for the terrible drought. I think they're right.

Just two years ago, Zimbabwe was a net exporter of maize. The record harvests in 1989-90 earned this country the reputation as the potential breadbasket of the region. Zimbabwe won an award, the Africa Prize for a Sustainable End to Hunger, for setting such an outstanding example. Yet this year Zimbabwe has a maize deficit of 2.4 million tons, with 1.7 million tons still to be imported to avoid widespread starvation. To put those numbers into perspective, if one train can haul about 1,300 tons of grain into Zimbabwe, then this country needs about four trainloads coming in every day for the next nine months to meet its needs.

How could the nation's food production decline so precipitously? And what happened to the grain surpluses stored up for just such an emergency?

Drought is not necessarily the same as famine, although most people believe the two are synonymous on the African continent. Drought is climatological. Modern-day famine, an acute shortage of food among the general population, often results from political causes.

Almost a million people died of starvation in Biafra, an eastern region of Nigeria that tried to break away during a civil war in the late 1960s. When famine struck in the Sahel in 1973-74, some food could be found in the marketplaces but hundreds of thousands still perished because they lacked money to buy it. An extended drought in Ethiopia threatened nationwide starvation in the 1980s, yet famine struck the hardest when the government deliberately blocked food aid from reaching rural areas where separatist armies were strong. The world now watches the people of Somalia die from hunger as factions vie for political control.

In Zimbabwe, the current crisis of hunger stems from both climatological and political causes. Pride, policy mistakes, placating consumers through price manipulation and international pressure have all helped inch the country closer to disaster.

The latest estimates indicate almost five million out of Zimbabwe's population of 10 million now face a serious shortage of food, with more than 800,000 children under the age of five already signed up for supplementary feeding programs. Next month could bring hundreds of thousands more onto the relief rolls.

The visible effects of dearth can be seen in the rural areas. The withered remains of antelope, donkeys and cows lie along the roadsides in the south. Many ecologists in Zimbabwe have predicted a 100 percent die-off of most of the wildlife species in the drier, southwestern "low veld" region of the country. The bodies of birds have collected around the trees where they fell dead. Along the dried up streams, hundreds of hippo carcasses lie rotting, looking like boulders in the sand.

In the far north and far south of Zimbabwe, most perennial grasses are dead, while trees and bushes shed their leaves earlier than usual. Many younger or shallow-rooted tree species have died and the drought-resistant baobabs are visibly shrinking, leaving cracks around their barrel-like trunks. Even the insect life has vanished, except for termites that feast on the abundance of dead organic material lying on the ground. Soon the lack of moisture should affect them, too, biologists say.

Without any grass for grazing, the cattle in the country are dying, with more than 140,000 dead as of last month. Some farmers in the southeast say their cattle have already been wiped out. The Cattle Producers Association estimates that 50,000 cattle on commercial farms will die before November and another one million cows will meet the same fate in the communal lands.

Obert Mukono, of Chibwedziva village near Chiredzi, used to be considered wealthy with a herd of 350 cows. Now he's lost 120 head, an average of seven a day. When a cow lies down at a dried-up water hole, Mukono knows it won't get back up.

"Cattle are important to us," said 70-year-old Mukono. "They provide us with draught power, meat and are also our source of income. I sell my cattle to buy food, clothes and to get school fees for my children. Our cattle are dying. This is a real disaster and we don't know what to do."

Like a classical Greek tragedy, the hubris of Zimbabwe's leaders led to the country's predicament in this drought. Overly proud of their reputation as a "breadbasket" for the region, politicians refused to accept warnings as early as June last year that a severe drought would strike the region.

That first word of caution came from the "food security unit" of the Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference, a regional grouping of nations cooperating together on trade, transport and research. The unit issued another urgent bulletin in November, but agricultural officials scorned its dire predictions. Instead, Zimbabwe continued to export grain.

One government minister berated the researchers for making such pessimistic forecasts, stating that "Zimbabwe would always have grain surpluses." An United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization meteorology expert at the unit left the country earlier this year shaking his head. "Why do this work when no one will listen?" he wondered out loud.

When the drought did hit, pride and politics also prevented Zimbabwe from reacting quickly to the food shortage. State Grain Marketing Board Chairman Cephas Msipa recognized the dangerous situation earlier this year and prudently began exploring the chances of importing grain from South Africa. An insider told me such regional imports might have been quickly signed for the right price, but President Mugabe squelched Msipa's initiative. Mugabe, one of South Africa's most vociferous critics, did not want the embarrassment of assistance from the apartheid regime.

Imminent starvation of Zimbabweans pushed Mugabe to soften his stance. To save face, he left on a vacation to Ireland while Zimbabwe Minister of Transport Denis Norman met his counterpart in South Africa. It was the first-ever meeting between cabinet ministers of the two countries. Zimbabwe immediately purchased 20,000 tons of maize, sending two South African trainloads of maize to Harare each day in May and June. An official accord was later signed to help speed up drought relief supplies being off-loaded at South African ports. Asked if the agreement signaled a normalization of ties, Mugabe made a tart denial. "It's a humanitarian issue and therefore it's above politics," he said.

Another reason for the shortfall in food lies in the lack of reserve stocks. Four years ago, Zimbabwe had a massive maize stockpile totalling 1.54 million tons in its grain silos. Such a reserve, the equivalent of 15 month's national supply, made officials complacent about grain sales to other countries.

For the last two years, in fact, export sales have exceeded the Grain Marketing Board's intake. Back in 1990, GMB officials saw the dangerous implications of declining food stocks and decided to end marketing grain abroad completely. Yet export commitments had to be continued, due in part to the IMF's intense political pressure on Zimbabwe to get rid of the surplus and run the national marketing board like a commercial business. More than 116,000 tons of Zimbabwe's maize and sorghum have been shipped overseas through Mozambique as the disaster unfolds.

There's a third reason for the critical lack of food in Zimbabwe: There have been few incentives to grow it. The state controls both the production price for farmers and the selling price to consumers. Political expediency during the last several years prompted the government to pay unrealistically low prices to farmers for maize to keep consumers happy and shore up the party's diminishing popularity.

The Commercial Grain Producers' Association estimates that the total cost of production per hectare (2.47 acres) of maize increased by 120 percent in the last six years, while the state-controlled purchase price rose by only 25 percent. Many of the commercial farmers stopped planting maize to grow lucrative crops like tobacco, which has no controlled price. While maize farmers last year received US \$55 a ton, a tobacco grower sold a ton of the "golden leaf" for US \$3,300. It was an easy choice.

As commercial farmers stopped growing maize, the small scale communal farmers produced a proportionally greater share of the country's food. Peasant farmers use family labor, instead of tractors, to grow their crops, so the cost of the labor input for growing maize isn't often taken into account by the peasants. After selling their maize to the marketing board, these rural people effectively had worked for only pennies per hour.

"The production of the national staple food has depended increasingly on the lack of awareness by peasants and small scale farmers of the true value of their labor," said Duncan Hale, the senior manager of Standard Bank of Zimbabwe. As a banker, Hale says he's followed the steady decline in the health of the food production sector because of the poor prices set by the state.

Since peasants in the communal lands are more reliant on rainfall than commercial farmers, they're less able to cope with the periodic droughts of Southern Africa. Relying on the communal sector for a grain surplus is disastrous, Hale said. "This

exploitation has proved extremely dangerous and the current drought has merely precipitated a crisis which is an inevitable consequence of pricing policy."

Peasants aren't stupid, however, so when Zimbabwe received an average of only 30 percent of the rains expected, they sold off only a modicum of their meager harvests. Unlike commercial farmers, communal farmers can't spare much surplus in hard times.

Fortunately, with the assistance of international donors, drought relief has arrived and most of the food shortages have ended. Temporarily. In the months ahead, the government's budget will be under tremendous strain to import the needed food.

At the cattlemen's annual congress last month, the organization warned of a beef shortage for the next three years because so much of the herd has been lost. At the same time, the Grain Marketing Board halved the amount of corn available for stockfeed and increased its price by 290 percent. This means chicken farmers have begun to drastically reduce their flocks. Commercial pig producers are also butchering madly. In a year or so, there won't be a lot of protein left in Zimbabwe since eggs, chickens, pork, beef and milk will all be in short supply.

Things may look bad for the cattle ranchers, but other basic industries have also been hurt. For instance, one of the country's largest sugar producers estimated that 98 percent of the sugar cane has been wiped out. Since sugar cane has to grow for 14 months before it's ready for cutting, Zimbabwe won't see domestically produced sugar until the end of the 1995/96 season. The company usually earns some US\$24 million each year in foreign currency for Zimbabwe.

Coffee plantation owners in the eastern highlands reported only 30 percent of their crops could be harvested. The output of tea estates have also been reduced by the same margin. Similarly, soybean and sunflower production drastically plummeted, so consumers can count on shortages of cooking oil and margarine.

Like staple food items, jobs may be in short supply very soon. The newspaper headlines almost daily foretell the winding down of the cotton industry and with it, the closing down of the cloth-making factories. "Textile firm lays off over 6,000," proclaimed a recent front-page banner headline. "Glendale weaving firm lays off 400 employees," read the paper a few days later. "Cotton lint shortage bites at Belle's," announced another article. Only a quarter of the cotton harvest came in this year, so without expensive lint imports thousands of people will lose their jobs, from the cotton pickers to the factory workers.

These economic woes have sparked a previously unheard of amount of criticism of the government. The enthusiasm for the

ZANU (PF) government in the first years of independence has given way to open calls for the resignation of top ministers, including the former minister of agriculture who is now the minister of education and culture. In the civil service, where many ZANU (PF) supporters have been given jobs, bitter discussions center on the structural adjustment necessity of retrenching 6,000 government workers. Even in parliament, angry speeches are made attacking stalwart party ministers for their role in the crisis:

"The problem is that we started off lying, saying there was a lot of maize coming and that trucks will soon bring it to them (the people)," said parliament member Sabina Mugabe, the president's sister. "Now I have run out of ideas."

"I am calling upon this parliament today to say to the president, what the government has declared as the drought-stricken nation, he must declare the ministers drought stricken and suspend them," said parliament member S. Vuma. "They have deceived and cheated the nation."

"For unknown reasons government decided to buy time until it was overtaken by events, events of drought," said Sydney Malunga, another member of parliament. "Now the Almighty decided to frown this year and if he continues to frown until perhaps the end of the year, then the whole nation will die."

The drought has lit the fuse of a bomb created by the IMF austerity measures. The slow burn will continue. Despite assurances from the IMF that additional loans will help offset the high cost of grain imports from the United States and South America, the huge food bill will ultimately have an enormously negative effect on the country's balance of payments. In the months ahead, when the government can no longer sustain even a limited subsidy on food, the explosion of popular unrest could wreck Zimbabwe's hard-won stability as a nation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Casey Elias", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Received in Hanover, August 26, 1992