

UN agency reports more than 800 million hungry worldwide

By Debra Watson
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At the beginning of the new millenium the number of hungry people in the world stands at 830 million according to officials of the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations agency responsible for distributing food aid.

The UN study reports that while globally there is enough food to supply the world's population, extreme poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth make it impossible for millions to adequately nourish themselves.

“We're looking at a number of ‘hot spots’—especially in Africa—where WFP's continued help will be necessary to prevent people from starving to death,” WFP head Catherine Bertini said at a New York press conference last week. While war and drought continue to be major factors forcing people to go without food, Bertini said that millions went hungry not just because of conflict or natural disaster but also because they are poor.

The number of hungry has not fallen below the 800 million mark despite a 1996 World Food Summit pledge to halve the number of hungry in the world by 2015. In 1996 the number of hungry climbed to 828 million, reversing a 20-year decline in the number who suffer or die from hunger. The number of people affected by man-made and natural disasters increased from 52 million in 1999 to 62 million in 2000.

Most of the hungry live in the underdeveloped countries. The average food deficit for the undernourished is 300 kilocalories a day. It takes about 2,100 calories per day to sustain an adult. Every day 24,000 people die from the effects of hunger.

The World Food Program has developed a world map to show several areas where hunger is a critical problem:

* Sub-Saharan Africa has the most concentrated

population of hungry. One of every three people in sub-Saharan Africa suffers from undernourishment. Afghanistan is the worst hit country in the Near East and North Africa, with 9 percent of the people of this region undernourished.

* In Asia and the Pacific region 525 million, or 17 percent of a total population of 3 billion, are malnourished. North Korea, Mongolia, Cambodia and Bangladesh are critical areas. Drought has also affected millions of people in Tajikistan, Pakistan, Iran, Armenia and Georgia.

* In Latin America and the Caribbean 11 percent of the population—53 million people—are hungry. Haiti, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Honduras are the worst hit. The agency noted that the WFP project targeted to feed internal refugees fleeing the civil conflict in Columbia is drastically underfunded.

WFP officials also cite the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where economic hardship over the last decade has caused a continuing rise in the number of people suffering from lack of adequate nourishment. In the Balkans nearly 1 million people need food aid. “The populations, particularly in Serbia, are grappling with spiraling food prices and economic hardship,” according to the agency. More than three-quarters of the 34 million undernourished people living in developed countries are in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Large areas of Iraq face hunger and deprivation. Two years of severe drought and inadequate availability of essential agricultural goods—the latter a result of the Gulf War and subsequent sanctions—have seriously affected crop and livestock production in Iraq.

A recent Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO)/WFP Food Supply and Nutrition Assessment Mission to Iraq found total cereal

production in 2000, estimated at some 796,000 tons, is about 47 percent below 1999 and 64 percent below the average of the past five years. In addition, the food rations supplied under the Oil-for-Food Program and distributed nationwide “do not provide a nutritionally adequate and varied diet,” according to the report.

Hartwig deHaen, FAO assistant director-general and head of its Economic and Social Department, noted in 1998: “Globally there is enough food to feed the world, but it is not equally distributed and many people do not have the means to buy it.”

FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf introduced the agency's main report for 2000 in a similar manner: “Observers of our time have termed it variously an ‘information’, ‘atomic’ and ‘globalization’ age. It can also be characterized, sadly, as an age of ‘inequity.’ Indeed, it is difficult to find a more apt description for a world in which disparities and inequities are as striking as they are unjustified—a world in which the poorest 20 percent of the population accounts for slightly more than 1 percent of global income, while the richest 20 percent claims 86 percent.”

Diouf also noted that inequality is increasing: “Between 1960 and 1994, the income ratio between the richest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent increased from 30:1 to 78:1.”

According to the FAO's “The State of Food and Agriculture 2000”:

* Thirteen percent of the world's population still lack access to adequate amounts of food, and more than 30 countries were experiencing serious food emergencies. The report also noted that “advances in technology and resources have made hunger more avoidable and therefore more intolerable today.”

* A growing number of the chronically undernourished are likely to be among the urban poor. The world's current population of 5.9 billion is split more or less equally between cities and rural areas. However, some 60 million people annually are moving into cities, and by 2005 urban areas are expected to surpass rural areas in population. By 2015, 26 cities in the world, most in countries now categorized as developing, are expected to have populations of 10 million or more.

* While the number of malnourished has been halved in East and Southeast Asia since 1970, it has doubled in Africa.

In December 2000 the FAO reported severe food shortages persisting in 15 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, affecting 28 million people, up from 19 million in 1999. The situation remains most critical in eastern Africa, where 20 million people were expected to require continued food assistance well into 2001.

The World Food Program reports on Africa:

* The countries facing the most intense food emergencies are Angola, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Over 3 million people in the Sudan have no food reserves and a severe shortage of clean drinking water, partly resulting from drought and the effects of civil war.

* In Guinea there are hundreds of thousands of refugees who need to be fed, including 130,000 Liberians and 330,000 Sierra Leonians. Some refugees have fled fighting in Guinea to return home to hunger in their own war-wracked country.

* In Angola a lack of funding has forced WFP to cut off food to nearly a third of the 1.5 million people suffering from hunger in that country. Besides war and civil strife in several African countries, huge government debt burdens, poor funding for health and education, pervasive poverty and poor agriculture productivity are cited by the UN agency as major causes of hunger.

The AIDS epidemic has further undermined farming in Africa. Africa accounts for only one tenth of the world's population but nine out of ten new cases of HIV infection. Eighty-three percent of all AIDS deaths are in Africa, where the disease has killed 10 times more people than war. Marcela Villarreal of the FAO commented last year: “Agricultural labor is being lost at a rapid rate, and mechanisms for transmitting knowledge and know-how are being undermined.” The FAO estimates that in the 25 most-affected African countries, AIDS has killed 7 million agricultural workers since 1985 and could kill another 16 million outside the cities in the next 20 years.

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