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Drought Deepens Poverty, Starving More Africans

By MICHAEL WINES

CHIKWAWA, [Malawi](#) - It has barely rained for a year, the scant corn harvest of six months ago is long exhausted and the regional hospital here is again filling with near-starving children - 18 admissions in August, 30 in September, 23 by mid-October.

And what people here routinely call the hunger season - the season with no corn - has barely begun.

"We used to have six, seven children in the unit," said Emily Sarina, the district nursing officer. "We expect the number to increase by December, because that's when the hunger is critical."

Malawi is the epicenter of Africa's second hunger crisis in five months, and the second in which the developed world has responded with painful slowness.



Drought is only the surface explanation for why millions of Malawians and other southern Africans are hungry. The real reason is poverty, aggravated by regional shortages and even Hurricane Katrina, which have helped drive up the price of corn, the regional staple, to more than double last year's.

As a result, more than 4.6 million of Malawi's 12 million citizens need donated food to fend off malnutrition until the next harvest begins in April. In [Zimbabwe](#), at least four million more need emergency food aid. [Zambia's](#) government has issued an urgent appeal for food, saying 1.7 million are hungry; 850,000 need food in [Mozambique](#), 500,000 in [Lesotho](#) and at least 300,000 in [Swaziland](#).

The World Food Program, which will feed most of the needy, has asked the developed world for \$400 million toward that goal. It remains \$165 million short.

The United States' contribution, \$48 million worth of corn bought from American farmers, comes by ship and will not arrive until late this year at the earliest.

Much like July's crisis on southern [Niger's](#) narrow band of grasslands, the food shortage in southern Africa is taking its toll. Growing malnutrition has led to scattered reports of disease-related deaths among young children weakened by hunger.

That said, problems here are not yet as acute as they are in Niger, where thousands of malnourished children still flock to treatment centers, months after international aid began arriving.

This region's emergency, however, is far larger - more than 12 million hungry people, versus 2.5 million in Niger. And if the death toll is likely not to be as high, the suffering here is no less real.

"I went to a village today in rural Zambia where there was a lady eating some kind of bark, in boiled water," Michael Huggins, the World Food Program's regional spokesman, said in a telephone interview. "In three years in southern Africa, I've heard a lot about that sort of thing. But I'd never seen it until today."

In Chikwawa, a district of about 400,000 in southern Malawi, half the population was already hungry in May, when the last harvest netted only about two-fifths of the nation's corn requirement. The British charity Oxfam estimated then that the district's needy were getting about 30 percent of their food requirements.

Six months later, many are calling this Malawi's worst hunger crisis since 1993, when drought destroyed nearly half of the corn crop. "At this point, most of the households in Malawi have run out of food, particularly in the south," Schuyler Thorup, the Malawi representative for Catholic Relief Services, said in a telephone interview. "They're having to rely exclusively on the market" for corn and other staple foods.

But few can afford to pay market prices. Just 500 miles south of Malawi, [South Africa](#) is sitting atop a surplus of five million metric tons of corn from this year's bumper harvest. But it is mostly out of reach for both Malawi's government and its people, 60 percent of whom survive on a dollar a day or less.

The same is true of most of Malawi's needy neighbors. War wrecked Mozambique's economy; socialism and plunging copper prices reduced Zambia to penury; Zimbabwe's economy collapsed after the government seized its richest farms, which were owned by whites.

In Malawi, 20 years of shifting political rule and economic policies have turned an already poor nation into a basket case. The AIDS pandemic - the rate of infection is about 15 percent among all adults, but perhaps 25 percent in Chikwawa - has cut down family breadwinners and left 900,000 children without one or both parents.

Most Malawians survive on plots of a couple of acres, often lacking even oxen for plowing. Irrigation is unheard of, leaving them dependent on good rains for survival.

Lately, rains have been spotty. There were severe hunger crises in 2002 and 2003, and this year's disaster was brought on when good rains in late 2004 dried up in 2005, just as the corn crop was ripening.

But even in good years, Malawians are incapable of feeding themselves. A recent report by the United States Agency for International Development said the nation "is now in a near constant state of food shortage, with persistently high levels of nutritional deprivation." Most Malawians cannot finance even a minimally adequate diet. Half of all children are stunted - and 40 percent of those are severely stunted, the marker of deep, prolonged malnutrition.

Corn prices are at the root of this year's crisis. In the past, after most poor harvests, Malawians have bought cheap corn from traders in Mozambique, Zambia or Zimbabwe. This year's spotty rains caused a regional shortage, driving up prices in Malawi's markets. In mid-October last year, a kilogram of maize in Chikwawa, 2.2 pounds, cost about 13 cents. This year, it cost nearly 32 cents.

Even Hurricane Katrina has worsened matters. When the storm closed New Orleans to shipping, depriving [Japan](#) of its normal source of corn, the Japanese turned to South Africa, and in weeks the price of South African corn in Malawi jumped nearly 20 percent.

For months, the charities and international donor groups that effectively keep Malawi afloat operated on "Scenario 1," projecting that corn prices would remain affordable for most, and that the destitute would need only 272,000 metric tons of donated corn.

Donors have pledged almost that much. But now, with prices skyrocketing, the number of Malawians who cannot afford food is rising as well.

"Scenario 2" calls for finding 413,000 metric tons of donated food, at considerably higher prices.

Especially in the south, where harvests were the worst, high prices have brought growing malnutrition and sometimes unrest at sites where donors try to distribute too little food to too many desperate people.

A recent visit to the rehabilitation center at the regional hospital in Chikwawa City, a hub of about 10,000 people, made it clear why.

Camped on the sidewalk in the unit's square courtyard, 29-year-old Samson Hanock watched his 2-year-old son, Ben, while his wife, Ester, 20, cradled their newborn son, born at the unit in September. Ben was brought there from Mtobwe village, about two hours distant, with malnutrition and severe anemia.

Mr. Hanock is a gardener. Working six days a week, four weeks a month, brings a salary of \$6.65, from which his employer deducts \$5.85 to buy the Hanocks a 110-pound bag of corn meal.

Mr. Hanock spends the remaining 80 cents on sugar. "I bake some sweets that I ask my wife to sell," he said. "And with that, we get some money to buy soap and other things."

Across the courtyard, Severia Karunga looked after Precia Yaka, a somber 9-year-old orphan from Badueza, 90 minutes away by car, who had come to the unit in July with malnutrition, malaria, edema and, it turned out, tuberculosis.

Precia's father died four years ago. Her mother died at 21, a month after Precia arrived here. Ms. Karunga, Precia's aunt, now cares for Precia, her brother and her own seven children. She lives with her mother, who cares for two other orphaned children.

"My husband is divorcing me because he isn't happy that I am caring for this child," she said, gesturing toward Precia. "He left last month."

Mother, daughter and 11 children, ages 6 to 18, get by on less than \$50 a month. Most comes from the \$9 weekly salary the mother draws from a charity's self-help program. The family has an eight-acre garden, "but this year," Ms. Karunga said, "I don't think I will be able to cultivate it, because I am spending all my time at this hospital."

Nationally, admissions of malnourished children to Malawi's 95 nutritional rehabilitation centers were up 15 percent in September from last year. Continuing increases are all but certain. Most children will spend a few weeks in rehabilitation, said Ms. Sarina, the district nursing officer. Then, healthy once more, they will be sent home.

And the cycle will begin anew.

"The problem," Ms. Sarina said, "is that when they go back, there's nothing to depend on."