

## Major Food Crisis in Mauritania

20 December 2002

This year, rainfall has been poor in the Western part of the Sahel in West Africa. Mauritania has been the hardest hit – in some regions of the country, it is the third consecutive year of poor rains. **Now some 750,000 people are already affected by food shortages, nearly 30 per cent of the country's population.**

In many parts of the country, most of the rain-fed crops have failed. Aftout and Affole, two of the poorest regions in the country, are also the worst off this year for food production. In late November, Oxfam spoke with Marouck Ould Mishood, a farmer in the Aftout region. He told us about his two fields of sorghum and maize: 'I expect a maximum of 10 per cent produce from these fields this year,' he said. 'Birds and insects are foraging for food and are attacking my fields, so I might not even get that.'

The agricultural situation across the country is bleak. Cereal production for the year 2002/03 is 18 per cent lower than for 2001/02. Agricultural production in 2002/03 is 40 per cent lower than average production of the last five years. This deficit will only be partly filled by commercial imports. Nearly 100,000 tons of food aid will be needed to cover the food needs of the most vulnerable people until September 2003.

Almost all the households in affected areas have lost livestock, leaving them poorer and more vulnerable than before. Freak storms last January killed some 120,000 animals. In addition, rains since have not been sufficient to regenerate the pastures, and herders already worry about the survival of the livestock they have left. The case of Maad, a small farmer and herder Oxfam met in the Affole area, is common: in July and August, when rains failed, he lost 25 of his 40 cows.

Without timely international intervention, there is a risk that the food crisis will result in famine, with a real possibility of deaths from outright starvation or hunger-related diseases. USAID's Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) raised the alarm in September 2002 and again in November 2002, warning of imminent famine for farming households. Overall, the

World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that 750,000 of Mauritania's population of 2.7 million people are already affected by food shortages, and that 410,000 people urgently need emergency food aid.

Malnutrition is worsening. A nutritional survey recently completed by World Vision in Assaba and Tagant regions showed that the combined global acute malnutrition rate in the areas assessed was 12.6 per cent, while the severe rate was 2.8 per cent. However, the crude mortality rate (CMR) was alarming high;<sup>1</sup> this could indicate that many of those who had been malnourished have already died.

For those who are still managing to get by, their struggle is getting harder. The price of sorghum has increased by nearly 60 per cent between January and September 2002. In the meantime, the price of livestock dropped sharply, by between 40 and 60 per cent, depending on the regions. **As a result, agro-pastoralist people are getting poorer and poorer, selling more livestock to get less food.**

Some families in Aftout area have already been forced to collect wild seeds in order to feed their children. One family told the Oxfam team, 'We started collecting Haz (wild seeds) a few weeks ago. This we pulp to make into a porridge. It fills our children's stomachs, but has little nutritional value.' A recent survey conducted by WFP underlined that 40 per cent of the food-insecure households eat only once a day.

Migration to the main cities is another way to cope. In many villages all the men have left to find work or food. Women remain alone with the children and face huge difficulties to feed their families: some 39 per cent of food-insecure households are now female headed. In other areas, women themselves have to migrate. In Gaat Teidouma, a small village in the Affole, the Oxfam assessment team found that about half of the women had left, many to work in the cities.

Response by the donors to the food crisis in Mauritania has been so far inadequate and slow. The first emergency appeal launched by WFP to cover the period April to December 2002 was not funded until the last minute, creating problems in delivery and planning that hampered the relief effort. Increased awareness amongst some donors meant that WFP recently received some donations from Germany, Spain and Sweden for the earlier appeal, but there are no firm commitments for the period after December. **In the face of other humanitarian crises in the world, averting a famine in Mauritania appears to be a priority for no one.**

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<sup>1</sup> The crude mortality rate in the survey sample between April 1 and September 2002 was 0.47 deaths per 10,000 populations per day or 1.40 deaths per 1,000 per month, while the under-five mortality rate was 0.67 per 10,000 per day or 2.02 deaths per 1,000 per month.

Beyond meeting the immediate food needs of the populations affected, it is clear that livelihoods are at risk in Mauritania. Oxfam has already launched a food security intervention to support vegetable gardening for 1,100 households through 147 women's co-operatives in Affole and Aftout. However, much more assistance is needed in livestock support and livelihoods. Donors should consider approaches that allow for diversification in vegetable and cereal cultivation, complemented by fodder distribution and the improvement of dams to contain water, for example.

There is little doubt that without a humanitarian intervention, mortality rates will continue to increase, as access to food becomes more and more difficult. WFP is launching an emergency appeal for the Western Sahel covering the period from 1 January through 31 December 2003. The appeal is for \$28m to provide for emergency assistance in Mauritania, Cape Verde, Senegal, The Gambia, and Mali. Of the 55,000 MT requested, some 43,000 MT are needed for Mauritania.

It is imperative that donors respond generously and swiftly to this appeal. Failure to secure funds and food will, without any doubt, result in increased hunger-related deaths and will leave communities even more vulnerable.

## Recommendations

- **The international community must respond swiftly and generously to WFP's \$28 million Emergency Operation Appeal (EMOP) for the Western Sahel to ensure that adequate resources are available through to the next harvest in September 2003.**
- **The international community should take a regional approach to food security initiatives across the Western Sahel countries.** While the assessments of malnutrition levels indicate that Mauritania is the hardest hit, there are real pockets of suffering in other countries as well.
- **The international community must support disaster mitigation activities** aimed to lessen the effects of drought and strengthen local capacity to cope. Drought is indeed a cyclical disaster threat to Mauritania and the Sahel region as a whole; long-term initiatives that build on local coping strategies, while also diversifying opportunities for food security and income, would be a good approach.

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