

SA at risk of food crisis

As food prices soar because of the ailing global and domestic economies, South Africans should also start worrying about the availability of something to eat.

Gareth Ackerman, chairman of Pick n Pay, warned that the country was extremely vulnerable and all that was needed to shake its food security was one severe drought.

Hunger is already on South Africa's doorstep.

Neighbouring Lesotho is in dire straits, according to the World Food Programme. The tiny country's maize production fell by 77% this year and its wheat harvest halved.

"Lesotho is facing the devastating effects of two successive crop failures due to drought and late rainfall," the UN agency said.

Ackerman said a number of factors had, in recent years, put local food production under pressure:

- More than 15 million social grants had lifted many people out of subsistence farming and turned them into consumers;
- and restitution had left some farms unproductive;
- Foreign investors had bought land only to use it to grow crops exclusively for export; and
- Population growth and urbanisation necessitated increased food production.

Ackerman said he was concerned about the danger of political unrest if there was a sudden spike in food prices.

A large part of the population consumes maize as a staple and has been feeling the effects of price increases for months.

"Part of the maize problem is not only feeding people, but feeding the protein stock [animals] that feeds people," Ackerman said.

Maize is one of the most important inputs in the production of meat and though South Africa had a good crop prices follow those of the rest of the world.

Prices have risen considerably because the US is in the grip of the worst drought in 50 years.

Ackerman said higher maize prices were making poultry expensive, further squeezing consumers who are already paying more for electricity and transport.

"Frozen chicken pieces are among the most popular sellers in Pick n Pay, especially among lowincome customers," he said.

The drought in the US, coupled with fears that Russia will restrict wheat exports, have raised the spectre of a world food crisis similar to that of 2007-2008.

"A global food crisis? I don't think we're there yet," he said.

According to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation, food prices have now stabilised but at a high level.

This week's increase of 23c a litre for petrol and 40c for diesel will have a double impact on consumers. And Ackerman said shoppers would feel the bite of the current labour unrest because the wage increases would fuel inflation.

Source: *The Times*

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