

Zimbabwe: Hunger greater than thought

The number of Zimbabweans requiring food assistance in the first quarter of 2009 has been revised upwards to 5.5 million people.

JOHANNESBURG , 19 December 2008 (IRIN) - The UN World Food Programme (WFP) spokesman for southern Africa, Richard Lee, told IRIN that "the situation was worse than anticipated", and the number of intended recipients had increased by 400,000, from an original figure of 5.1 million beneficiaries.

Food assistance is being provided by the WFP and the US-funded Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency (C-SAFE).

The April 2009 harvest is not expected to relieve to the country's food insecurity. Initial expectations were for "a poor harvest; how poor we don't know yet," Lee said.

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In all likelihood, another large-scale [feeding] operation will be needed throughout 2009, into 2010 South African President Kgalema Motlanthe, the current chairperson of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a 14-member body of regional states, told reporters in Pretoria on 17 December that SADC members would be canvassed "to take urgent action to attend to the humanitarian crises in Zimbabwe and in the Democratic republic of Congo".

Motlanthe did not give any further details, but R300 million (US\$31 million) in assistance to Zimbabwe, promised on condition that a power-sharing deal between rival political parties was finalised, has fallen by the wayside because of the delays.

"The R300 million was specifically for agricultural produce and, as you know, the planting season is almost over," he said.

The leader of the Zimbabwean opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Morgan Tsvangirai, who is in Gaborone, the capital of neighbouring Botswana, threatened on 19 December to withdraw from a power-sharing agreement on 1 January 2009 if 42 MDC members, allegedly abducted by security forces, were not released by President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF government.

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