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Malawi's 'worst-ever' famine



Food shortages are killing Malawians

By **Raphael Tenthani**

BBC Blantyre reporter

For Chief Dzobwe, the traditional leader of a small cluster of settlements outside the central tobacco heartland of Kasungu, some 100 kilometres north of the capital, Lilongwe, this year's famine is historic.

"I was a young boy in 1949," the 71-year-old former miner says, "but this year's famine reminds me of the one we had then."

"The difference is that while in 1949 we could walk long distances to find food," says the chief, who claims he lost two to three of his villagers a week at the height of the famine between January and March, "there is now nowhere to go to find food."

“**We did not think things would be this bad**”

Vice-President Justin Malewezi

Kasungu, where officially more than 100 people starved to death by March, is the worst affected of Malawi's 27 districts.

But government officials say the picture is just as bleak in other parts of the country.

Vice-President Justin Malewezi says warning signs that there was an impending famine started flashing as early as August last year when it was noted that the country, which requires at least 1.8 million tonnes of the



Regional hunger

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- UN Food and Agriculture Organisation

staple crop, maize, per year to feed its 11 million people, had a deficit of 400,000 tonnes.

"But we did not think things would be this bad," he admits.

Slow to act

Indeed the government's belated admission that a human catastrophe is looming in the country has caught donors unprepared.

A senior World Food Programme official says it was difficult to convince rich governments to release emergency funds for Malawi without the government acknowledging there was a famine.

When the government finally did, more than seven million people, or three-quarters of the country's population, were on the verge of starvation.

Lessons may have been learnt because, this year, although the entire maize crop has not yet been stored in granaries, the government has already asked for help.



Maize from grain warehouses has been in short supply

The ministry of agriculture has published crop estimates, saying Malawi is set to record a 600,000-tonne deficit.

Lukewarm response

Secretary for Agriculture Ellard Malindi says the current lull in the famine is only temporary as people are currently eating maize grown in their gardens.

But most farming families do not harvest enough maize.

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He says the government is therefore urging rich countries and aid agencies to assist the country with emergency food aid if a human catastrophe is to be averted.



People queuing for maize rations at an aid agency site in Salima

The call for food aid, made when President Bakili Muluzi declared a state of national disaster in February, has received a lukewarm response from donors, fuelling fears that the crisis will continue.

Malawi needs at least \$21.6m to avert a human catastrophe.

But so far less than \$5m have come through.

Rampaging hippos

Mr Malindi says a number of factors, including heavy rains in some areas and prolonged dry spells in others, have led to a drop in the harvest of maize.

He says other reasons for the drop in maize production include floods, as well as rampaging elephants and hippos, which have destroyed large tracts of crop fields in a number of lakeshore districts, especially in the southern district of Mangochi.

The United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, says that between January and April, UN agencies spent at least \$2m on emergency food aid for vulnerable groups in 19 of the country's 27 districts.

“
If we don't handle the food crisis well, it will be difficult to convince people to vote for us

”
**Mekkie Mtewa
Mangochi MP**

UNDP representative Zahra Nuru says UN experts are currently assessing the situation to release more aid.

Malawi's former colonial master, Britain, has so far also released £2.6m of food aid for 255,000 households.

A number of church organisations have come in to help, but the scale of the disaster is just too great.

Shelf-life

Some donors say the donor fatigue is due in particular to the fact that last year's maize reserves were mismanaged.

Some of these stocks were sold to Kenya despite warnings that a famine was looming.

But Ellard Malindi, the Secretary for Agriculture, says the government sold the maize to Kenya because it had reached the end of its shelf-life.



Trying better varieties of maize to improve production

The country's Anti-Corruption Bureau is still investigating the controversial sale to check whether there was any corruption involved.

The food crisis has also affected the country's social strata.

In hospitals, the orthopaedic wards are full of amputees who received mob justice after being caught stealing.

School attendance has also dropped significantly.



It was pumpkin leaves that we survived on



President Muluzi has again assured Malawians that the government will **Anifa Matebule** make free food available to the most vulnerable.

But Anifa Matebule, a grandmother in the southern tea-growing district of Thyolo, says she has heard it all before.

"In January the government said we would get free maize, but it was pumpkin leaves that we survived on," she says, brandishing a ration card for a World Food Programme food distribution exercise which she says has come too late.

Political pressure

She lost a daughter and a grandchild to the famine.

Mekkie Mtewa, the MP for Mangochi, who has just been dismissed as deputy agriculture

minister for revealing that senior politicians were hoarding maize in order to sell it at higher prices, says the famine may be a political barometer.

"2004 (when the next general elections will take place) is not too far so if we don't handle the food crisis well, it will be difficult to convince people to vote for us," he says.



Those without money beg outside department stores

But in Kasungu, Chief Dzombe says he has no time for the politics of 2004. Having buried two of his teenage nephews, what he needs is for the politicians of today to deliver.

"The crops have failed again this year and, if we don't get help, we will perish," he says.

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