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Health conditions aggravate Southern Africa famine

4 August 2002 | SOUTHERN AFRICA -- Food aid must be accompanied by the provision of basic health services to avert tremendous loss of life triggered by the ongoing drought, the World Health Organization says today.

Devastating health conditions are putting 12-14 million people within Southern Africa at particular risk during the ongoing shortage of food. Rainfall failure has triggered a crisis which is being exacerbated by a combination of long-term deterioration in health services, the ravaging AIDS epidemic and serious economic problems facing countries in the region.

"Weakened by hunger, many people will die of diseases. They could have survived these if properly nourished - if they had produced adequate food or been able to purchase the food they need," says Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO Director-General. "We are particularly concerned about data coming in from the field showing a doubling of life-time risk of maternal mortality in some areas, the continuing rise in tuberculosis, acute respiratory infections and malaria. We fear there could be at least 300,000 extra deaths during the next six months because of this crisis."

The conditions are resulting in increased malnutrition levels particularly among children. One Malawi survey, for example, showed child malnutrition levels increasing from 6% - 19% in three months. These children are more susceptible to illness. This is already causing higher mortality rates in all groups, with a crude mortality in some areas exceeding one per 10,000 people per day which means we are already facing a severe humanitarian crisis.

"We're staring catastrophe in the face - unless we get food aid fast to millions of people whose lives are in the balance because they are starving," said World Food Programme Executive Director James Morris, who is also the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to the region. "With each passing month the situation will get worse if we don't receive more food, water and medicine," he added.

WFP is currently doing a second round of assessments with results expected in mid August; these may well show a marked increase in the number of people at risk. According to present estimates, seven million people require food now, rising to a peak of 12.8 million at the end of the year. To date, WFP has been feeding 4.6 million.

People living with HIV have reduced immunity leading to increased death rates. HIV/AIDS in the region has severely hit the working population, often leaving households headed by very young or very old people. People with AIDS are less able to work in the fields, and the cost of caring for them also puts further pressure on families.

The prevalence rates in the six countries average at around 24.9%, ranging from 16.4% in Malawi to 33.7% in Zimbabwe. In Malawi 470,000 children have lost one or both parents to the epidemic.

Figures from Malawi show that while the number of deliveries at health facilities have decreased by 7%, maternal mortality rates recorded in these health facilities increased by 71%, due to malnutrition and poor health status, lack of prenatal care and the weak capacity of the health system.

As of April this year, WHO has reported a total of 22 023 cases, including 609 deaths (case-rate fatality rate, 2.8%) in Malawi while WHO considers that a case-fatality rate should be of less than 1% for cholera. This is a clear indication that people, weakened by the lack of food, more easily succumb to disease.

The number of deaths can be greatly reduced by improving basic health care for particularly vulnerable groups in parallel with distributing food aid. In addition to encouraging essential help from international and non-governmental aid agencies, WHO is working to strengthen the countries' own capacity to provide health care in the worst affected areas. WHO is supporting health ministries with access to medicines, improve staffing and ensure that the health situation is carefully monitored. WHO is also

assisting governments in co-ordinating the relief efforts carried out by aid agencies, non-governmental agencies and other actors, to ensure the most effective response possible.

The emergency appeal for Southern Africa includes \$40m for health and nutrition activities in addition to the need for over \$500m for food. This financial support is essential to avert a major humanitarian catastrophe over the coming months.

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