

MIDDLE EAST: Climate change could threaten food security - FAO report



Photo: Leila Hatoum/IRIN

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DUBAI, 11 March 2008 - A report by UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), entitled [Climate Change: Implications for Agriculture in the Near East](#), has said the food security of those who are poor, malnourished or dependent on local food production could be adversely affected by climate change.

"Climate change will affect food security in all its four dimensions - food availability, food accessibility, food stability and food utilisation," Will Killmann, chairman of FAO's working group on climate change, told IRIN on 10 March.

"Food security is particularly threatened in the already vulnerable regions - sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and parts of the Middle East," he said.

Shifts in rainfall patterns could affect crops, particularly rice, in many countries in the region, said the FAO report, which has singled out Yemen as being particularly at risk because of its endemic poverty, rapidly growing population and acute water shortages.

High food prices are on everyone's lips across the Middle East. On 3 March Prime Minister of Bahrain Shaikh Khalifa Bin Salman al-Khalifa used his weekly meeting with officials and ordinary people to address the issue of food security in the region: "We need to draw lessons from the current spiralling inflation hitting the world and start seriously to think about ensuring food security in the Arab world," he said.

Risk of social unrest

Food security experts in the region warn that if regional food prices are not contained social unrest could occur. "In principle, increasing food insecurity can trigger resource-based conflict - be it agricultural or be it food," Killmann said.

Recent incidents in Egypt highlight the vulnerability of the Middle East region to the vagaries of reduced agricultural production and the rise in food prices: Two people were killed as they fought over a place in a queue for cheap, subsidised bread in Helwan, southern Cairo; Egypt's semi-official newspaper Al Ahram reported that a man doused a bakery with petrol before setting it alight after its owner refused to sell him bread; and a few days later, on 11 March, Al Ahram reported that the number of people who had died in bread queues (so-called "bread martyrs") had reached 10.



Photo: A.Etefa/UNHCR

According to Al Ahram newspaper in Egypt, 10 people have been killed recently fighting for places in bread queues

Egypt, the world's second-largest importer of wheat, subsidises wheat, flour and bread at an annual cost of US\$2.74bn to the state (New York Times, 17 January 2008). Economists have said the subsidies distort the economy and some within the government have reportedly been talking of a reduction in basic food subsidies. The last time the Egyptian government attempted to do that - in 1977 - there were street riots in which the police killed over 70 protesters. Bread prices in Egypt increased by 36.5 percent from February 2007 to February

2008.

In the past few weeks, there have been food riots or demonstrations - albeit on a smaller scale - against rising food prices in a number of countries in the region, including Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. A number of people have died in clashes with security forces. A clash in Beirut on 27 January between the Lebanese Army and a group of Shia protesters in which seven people were killed started with demonstrations over rising bread prices and power cuts.

On 6 March, while visiting the European Union in Brussels, the executive director of the UN World Food Programme, Josette Sheeran, warned that high food prices and resulting inflation would continue at least for the next two years, fuelling discontent on the streets of poorer nations.

"Our assessment is that the current level will continue for the next few years... in fact rise in 2008 and 2009 and probably [go on] at least until 2010," she said.

"Newly hungry"

Sheeran mentioned the effects of climate change as being one of the factors that have led to high food prices and what she called the "newly hungry".

"This is leading to a new face of hunger in the world, what we call the newly hungry. These are people who have money, but have been priced out of being able to buy food," she said. "Higher food prices will increase social unrest in a number of countries which are sensitive to inflationary pressures and are import-dependent. We will see a repeat of the riots we have already seen on the streets of Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Senegal."



Photo: IRIN

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Over 25,000 people die from hunger or related illnesses every day across the world, with one child dying every five seconds, according to WFP.

The situation could, in fact, worsen as FAO has warned that crop growing may become unsustainable in some areas as a result of the complex interactions of myriad factors. It said maize yields in north Africa, for example, could fall by 15-25 percent with a three degree centigrade rise in temperature.

A number of Gulf states have introduced price controls, including food subsidies and caps on rent increases, to offset the impact of price rises on their populations. The Omani Chamber of

Commerce and Industry, for example, proposed on 9 March that food suppliers should control price rises by introducing ceilings on nine basic food items, including rice, wheat flour, sugar, lentils, cooking oil, tea, milk powder, evaporated milk and ghee.

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