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IRIN

## Nearly nine million face food shortages in Afghanistan

08/09/2011

Ongoing drought in northern, northeastern and western Afghanistan is likely to push 1.5-2 million more people into food insecurity this autumn, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

This is in addition to the seven million country-wide already facing food shortages.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL) is reporting a failure of the rain-fed wheat crop, which accounts for about 55 percent of the total domestic wheat yield.

Irrigated wheat, which tends to yield more per hectare, has also been affected by the drought. The average wheat yield (without fertilizers) on irrigated land is about 2.7 tons per hectare (3.5 tons with fertilizer), versus only 1.1 tons on rain-fed land, according to MAIL.

In a normal year Afghanistan produces 4.5 million tons of wheat and around one million tons are imported. The shortfall of 1.9 million tons of wheat this year means more will either have to be imported or secured from other sources.

“Satellite derived rainfall estimates indicate that most of Afghanistan had an untimely and inadequate rain and snow season this year. As a result, there will be heavy losses in rain-fed wheat crops, underperforming irrigated wheat crops, poor pasture conditions, and low income earning opportunities in northern Afghanistan and the central highlands this year,” said the US Agency for International Development’s FEWSNET.

Increased need due to the drought comes as WFP is already facing a severe funding shortage for its existing programmes in Afghanistan.

“WFP had originally planned to feed more than seven million Afghans this year, but currently has the resources to reach less than four million,” WFP spokesman Assadullah Azhari told IRIN in Kabul.

He said additional funds would be required to cover the new drought-related needs.

President Hamid Karzai also expressed concern about the drought at a cabinet meeting on 30 July: “The current drought in certain provinces is hugely damaging to the life of people and their livestock.”

Sultan (he goes by only one name), 35, a farmer in Paghman District not far from Kabul, has been trying to truck in water for his wheat crop from a water source more than 10km from his village.

“All the water sources including the underground water have dried up in my village and now I need to pay a tanker to bring me water,” he told IRIN in Kabul. “I feel so sad... After two months my wheat is still only 20cm tall.”

He said that if he had had sufficient water for irrigation, his wheat crop would have been almost ready for harvest now. Even with expensive trucked-in water he would only get 20 percent of his normal crop, he added.

Assessments under way

According to MAIL officials, assessments are under way in drought-affected areas of the north, northeast, the west and the central highlands to determine exactly how many people will require food assistance and for how long.

Much of the looming wheat shortfall will be covered by government reserves and commercial imports. But additional humanitarian assistance may be required to support an estimated 1.5 to 2 million drought victims, according to WFP.

Karzai called on the ministries of commerce, finance and MAIL to take extra measures, and import wheat from India to try to meet needs.

WFP said the USA had cut its funding of WFP activities in Afghanistan by more than two-thirds since 2009. “But we continue to appeal to donors for the support that will allow us to ensure all those in need of help in the coming months are assisted,” said Azhari.

“The areas affected by drought are hard or impossible to reach by road during the winter. So it is critical to get food assistance in place early, before those people are cut off by snowfall,” he warned.