

NOTE

## **World is Hungry**

**Michael Fleshman writes :**

The protests against soaring food prices that swept dozens of countries around the world earlier this year have shaken governments and international aid agencies. They have also prompted a flurry of activity to lower the cost of basic staples and expand farm production.

Addressing an emergency summit on the global food crisis in Rome in June, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underscored the threat to political stability and development. "Nothing is more degrading than hunger, especially when man-made. It breeds anger, social disintegration, ill health and economic decline," he told world leaders. "Only by acting together, in partnership, can we overcome this crisis, today and for tomorrow. Hundreds of millions of the world's people expect no less."

The rise in prices has been most pronounced with the cereal crops - maize, wheat, rice, sorghum and millet - that comprise the basic diet of billions of people. They have also hit feed for cattle, chickens and other meat-producing animals. The price of wheat on world markets rose 130% between March 2007 and March 2008, while rice increased by nearly 90% and maize by nearly a third during that period. Prices for other foodstuffs, including vegetable oil, which went up by 97%, and dairy products, which went up by 58%, have kept pace.

The price hikes have fallen hardest on the poor in the 82 nations designated by the United Nations as low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs). Forty-two of those are in Africa. Many of these countries already suffer high rates of hunger and malnutrition and rely on imported food even in good times. Their governments can do little to cushion their citizens from price shocks, lacking funds for subsidies or emergency feeding programmes.

Since food costs typically absorb half or more of family incomes in such countries, many urban dwellers and the poorest farming families have little choice but to switch to cheaper, less nourishing foods, or to skip meals altogether. Consumers in many parts of Africa have started turning to locally grown foods as import prices rise. But even local produce has gotten more costly—in part because of surging fuel costs for transport and processing, but also because of limited supplies and increased demand.

The FAO cautions that high food prices are likely to continue for at least the next decade, and that the long era of large world food surpluses and cheap exports that began with the Green Revolution in Asia in the 1960s may be over for good.

"It was only when the destitute and those excluded from the banquets of the rich took to the streets to voice their discontent and despair, FAO's Mr Diour noted, that the world took notice. "The problem of food security is a political one," he concluded. "The time for talking is long past. Now is the time for action. □