

Rome, Italy, December 7 (Infosplusgabon) - Strong cereal harvests are keeping global food supplies buoyant, but localised drought, flooding and protracted conflicts have intensified and perpetuated food insecurity, according to the new edition of UN Food and Agriculture (FAO) Crop Prospects and Food Situation report.

Some 37 countries, 29 of which are in Africa, require external assistance for food, according to the report.

Ongoing conflicts continue to be a key driver of severe food insecurity, having triggered near-famine conditions in northern Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen, as well as widespread hunger in Afghanistan, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo - and Syria, FAO said.

Adverse weather conditions are taking their toll on farm food outputs in some regions, notably due to drought in East Africa and floods in parts of Asia.

The 37 countries, mainly in Africa, currently in need of external food assistance are Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Iraq, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania,

Mozambique, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Swaziland, Syria, Uganda, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

The report also flags concerns in Bangladesh, where three episodes of flash floods this year caused substantial damage to the rice crop. The country's paddy output is expected to fall to a five-year low. Imports are rising, as are prices for wheat, the cereal used in traditionally cheaper flour products.

Conflict exacerbates food insecurity by impeding productive activities and hindering both access to food and its availability, FAO said. The strains are intensified by significant numbers of internally displaced people. Their count has risen by almost 50 percent this year in the Central Africa Republic, where almost a third of the population (or 1.1 million) is in need of urgent assistance for food.

Some 7.7 million people are estimated to be in acute food insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which hosts more than 200,000 refugees from nearby countries and is home to more than 4 million internally displaced persons. Farmers in Kasai and Tanganyika regions, severely affected by the conflict, have reportedly reduced plantings.

The report finds similar effects of conflicts in northern Nigeria - where over 3 million people require urgent life-saving response and livelihood protection - and South Sudan, where, despite recent harvests, about 45 percent of the population (or 4.8 million) is food insecure and those in

an emergency situation - defined as "IPC Phase 4" have doubled from a year ago.

FAO said in Somalia, the risk of famine in several areas has been prevented so far due essentially to the delivery of large-scale humanitarian assistance. The hunger caseload has tripled during the past year and some 3.1 million people are now deemed to be severely food insecure.

In Yemen, 60 percent of the population (or 17 million) is believed to require urgent humanitarian assistance. Last month's closure of the country's maritime ports, if repeated, would increase the risk of famine conditions, according to the report.

Chronic hunger also persists in war-torn countries such as Afghanistan - where there has been an increase in the number of people fleeing their home this year and 7.6 million people now face moderate or severe food insecurity - Iraq, where 3.2 million people are in need of food assistance, and Syria, where 6.5 million people are hungry.

Drought is the main problem in East Africa. Some 8.5 million people are estimated to be food insecure in Ethiopia, especially in the Somali region. Consecutive unfavourable rainy seasons have curtailed crop and livestock production in Kenya, where about 2.6 million people are severely food insecure.

A severe summer drought has also cut Mongolia's wheat harvest by almost half.

Despite local negative trends, overall global food production is booming. In addition, production gains are being recorded in many Low-Income Food-Deficit Countries, where the aggregate cereal output is forecast to grow by 2 percent this year.

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