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Mauritania

Agricultural Situation

Mauritania Agricultural Situation Update 2007

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Report Highlights:

Mauritania will need to import nearly 315,000 tons of grains in 2007 to mitigate a 27 percent shortfall in food production compared to last year. This food security crisis, although not alarming, could worsen, and could affect as many as 600,000 people including 68,000 children. In addition to food aid donations, Mauritania will meet this gap with commercial imports. A list of prospective importers is included in this report.

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Executive Summary

Current food security conditions in Mauritania indicate that the 'hunger season' – as it is locally known - is settling in earlier than usual, particularly in rural areas. Mauritania will likely face food security problems due to low local grain availability, slowdown in trade with neighboring Senegal and Mali and relatively high market prices. Although there is no general food crisis, there are pockets of highly food-deficit households, mainly in poor rural areas.

This situation could worsen despite rural populations' various coping strategies to access to food. According to the World Food Program (WFP) 600,000 individuals could be affected, and this number could increase over the next few months in case of further deterioration of pasturelands and limited access to water.

In order to cover this food shortage, Mauritania will need to import approximately 315,000 tons of grains including rice, wheat and wheat flour.

Production

A joint mission by CILSS/FAO has estimated total cereal production in 2006 at 145,000 tons, 27 percent lower than last year's level and below average. This lower production reflects decreased yields resulting from pest damage and erratic rainfall. Mauritania domestic production covers only one-third of the country's cereal needs. The deficits are usually covered by imports of coarse grains (millet and sorghum) from Senegal and Mali, and wheat imports from the international market.

This year's shortfall in cereal production is mainly due to a series of dry spells and a shorter than usual rainy season. Irrigated area and crop yields have also been reduced due to inefficient irrigation systems and attacks by grain-eating birds. In addition, flood recession cropping has been limited, especially along the Senegal River Valley, due to lack of runoff from the river following the shutdown of the Manantalli Dam upstream on the Senegal River; lowland and late-season rain-fed crops have been also seriously damaged by pink stalk borers (*Sesamia Calamistis*)¹.

Food Security

About 30 percent of rural households in Mauritania rely on agriculture as their unique source of food and income. This year's cereal deficit will likely degrade the food security conditions for 32% of the population of the Senegal River Valley and other farming areas for late-season rain-fed crops according to FEWSNET Mauritania. In these regions, the hunger period started earlier in April, i.e. three months earlier than usual. Early seasonal migration of herders is also reported as the result of degrading pastures and limited access to water.

Mauritania will most likely go through a gradual household food deficit as this year's production will cover at most two months worth of household food requirements. Malnutrition rates are expected to increase due to the food shortage, rising poverty, and inadequate child feeding practices. The United Nations World Food Program forecasts that as many as 68,000 young children might be affected by malnutrition if sufficient funding is not available for feeding programs. The regions of Trarza, Brakna, Guidimakha and Gorgol are the most affected by acute malnutrition (rates higher than 10 percent, above the WHO's emergency threshold). According to WFP, 165,000 people – nine percent of the population – are highly vulnerable and depend on humanitarian assistance to survive through the toughest months

¹ FEWSNET Mauritania Food Security Outlook - 4/18/2007

of the year. In the worst-case scenario, this number could rise to 600,000 residents of rural areas. Household coping mechanisms include borrowing, migration and various government assistance programs supported by WFP, UNICEF, the United States, the European Union and various NGOs.

Trade

Mauritania relies heavily on imports of coarse grains and wheat to cover its structural food deficit. The lack of family food reserves, the decline in cross-border trade due to low production in Senegal and the small volume of grain imports from Mali earmarked for rural markets, mean that Mauritanian households must continue to rely on purchasing and/or borrowing (in some cases at exorbitant rates of interest) commercially marketed foodstuffs, such as imported rice and wheat, at constantly rising prices. Prices of both coarse grains and wheat are at relatively high levels, reflecting a lower harvest in Senegal and increasing wheat prices on the international market.

FEWSNET and the Government Food Security Commissariat forecast commercial imports of cereals at 314,386 tons of cereals and expect to receive 9,880 tons of rice as donation. Average annual need for wheat is estimated by 315,000 tons, and annual average imports over the last five years are 206,000 tons.

Commercial importers are interested in purchasing medium grade rice, wheat and wheat flour. SONIMEX is the national food company assigned by the government to import and handle food donations on behalf of the Food Security Commissariat.

Below is a list of major Mauritanian grain importers. Note: Their inclusion here does not reflect an endorsement of any kind.

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