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Increasing number of people face severe food shortages in South Sudan Nearly 7 million people expected to be in acute food insecurity at the height of lean season

22 February 2019, Juba - Nearly 7 million people in South Sudan could face acute food insecurity at the height of this lean season (May-July), three United Nations agencies warned today, urging for scaled-up humanitarian assistance and better access to humanitarian relief.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report released today in Juba by the Government of South Sudan in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) shows that the number of people who are acutely food insecure has already increased by 13 per cent since January last year.

This includes some 30,000 people who are already experiencing extreme food insecurity (in catastrophe phase or IPC5, the highest level of food insecurity) in Jonglei and Lakes states, in eastern and central South Sudan.

The report shows that food insecurity continues to be driven by the cumulative effects of conflict, insufficient food production and associated population displacement. Local cereal production in 2019 will only supply 52 per cent of the country's cereal needs, compared to 61 per cent in 2018.

Conflict continues to disrupt food production, deplete livestock and constrain people's access to alternative food sources. Prolonged dry spells, flooding, crop disease and pest infestation have severely impacted agricultural production which is largely rain-dependent. Poor people have been particularly vulnerable to high food prices and the limited availability of food in markets.

There is an urgent need for more funds to scale up humanitarian assistance to save lives and protect livelihoods. At the current level of assistance, the report indicates, some 50,000 people will be facing catastrophe (extreme food insecurity) between May and July. Without any assistance, this number could rise to 260,000.

"The projections are alarming and food security continues to worsen. Together with the people of South Sudan, we need to act urgently to reverse this trend. Our priority is to support families to maintain and increase their production, and help agro-pastoral communities preserve their livelihoods. Last year, FAO's distribution of seeds and agricultural tools had a positive impact on the country's food security, but this is not enough," said Pierre Vauthier, the FAO Representative a.i. in South Sudan. "If the peace agreement signed last September is fully sustained, FAO can further support returnees to rebuild their livelihoods and contribute to the recovery of the nation," he added.

There is a real risk of famine in those areas which are already very food insecure, should the overall situation in the country deteriorate and should there be a prolonged absence of humanitarian assistance. Parts of the country that are particularly at risk are Unity, Jonglei, Upper Nile and Lakes.

“Food insecurity is increasing in 2019,” said Simon Cammelbeeck, WFP’s Acting Country Director in South Sudan “Unless we scale up humanitarian and recovery activities soon, more and more people will be at risk. This is especially worrying as those most in need of assistance are malnourished women and children. We are gearing up to respond to this large rise in food needs.”

Malnutrition levels remain critical in many areas, with some 860,000 children under the age of five severely malnourished. However, there is likely to be an increased incidence of acute malnutrition during the coming lean season in most parts of the country.

“As access to those in need improves due to the peace process, we have been making significant progress in treating severe malnutrition in children, with a recovery rate above 80 per cent,” said Andrea Suley, UNICEF Representative a.i. in South Sudan. “Yet, our nutrition programme has a funding gap of 88 per cent or US\$55.4 million. If funding is not timely secured, the children we know how to save may not make it.”

Humanitarian support

“Sustained humanitarian support is required to address the immediate food assistance needs. It is also critical to support resilience activities to improve livelihoods and to increase families’ ability to cope,” said Humanitarian Coordinator in South Sudan, Alain Noudehou. “Full and timely implementation of the peace agreement is therefore essential to allow displaced people – the majority of whom are women and children – to return home and to resume their lives.”

The three UN agencies, along with other humanitarian organizations, have conducted massive relief operations since conflict erupted in late 2013. The Integrated Rapid Response Mechanism - mobile teams travelling usually by helicopter to reach people in isolated areas - is part of an inter-agency effort to provide immediate, life-saving support.

In 2019, FAO aims to provide 800,000 farming, fishing and agro-pastoral households in severely food insecure areas with vegetable and crop seeds, agricultural hand tools and fishing equipment. One crop kit enables a family to grow enough cereals to last more than six months – which can go a long way to alleviating hunger. In support of agro-pastoralist communities that tend to be heavily dependent on livestock, FAO is carrying out vaccinations and other animal health services to prevent large-scale animal mortality.

To meet the increased needs, WFP will provide the most vulnerable people with a variety of support including life-saving food and cash distributions in areas with working markets; food in return for work on the construction and rehabilitation of community assets; food for school meals; and special products for the prevention and treatment of malnutrition among children, and pregnant or nursing women.

WFP is currently delivering assistance to meet immediate needs and to bolster people’s resilience. WFP plans to pre-position 175,000 metric tons of food in more than 60 warehouses before the onset of the rainy season. Pre-positioning will not only help save lives but will reduce delivery costs, making costly airdrops unnecessary when many areas are unreachable by road during the rainy season.

In 2019, UNICEF is targeting more than two million children and their mothers to provide quality nutrition services. UNICEF will provide micronutrient supplements, health and WASH services and counselling on appropriate infant feeding and hygiene practices to prevent acute malnutrition. Early detection of children in need of nutrition services will be ramped up and ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) will be provided to treat severely acute malnourished children. For UNICEF to reach the women and children targeted, additional funding is needed, as the current funds only cover the programme to end April 2019.

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