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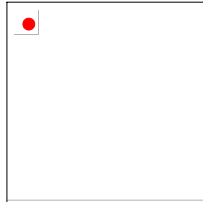
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National Section



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Committee says 1.5 million face food shortage

by NATION REPORTER (10/7/2008)

As President Bingu wa Mutharika continues to get international recognition for improving the country's food situation, an estimated 1.5 million people in six districts could face food shortage this year and need urgent action, according to a latest report by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (Mvac).



But government has reiterated there is no need to panic since the country recorded a food surplus last year and that stocks are being moved to deficit areas that were affected by, among others, drought and floods last year.

"It is estimated that 1.5 million are vulnerable to food insecurity. The worse affected districts include Mulanje, Zomba, Mzimba, Phalombe, Thyolo and Mangochi," says the report.

Mvac—chaired by government and assisted by some UN agencies and local NGOs in the food sector—says in the Southern Region districts of Chiradzulu and Phalombe it is estimated that 49 and 40 percent of the population risks of food insecurity.

But the reports agrees that the main reasons for the situation is low production due to "weather variations such as flooding, dry spells and early cessation of rains". It also says low purchasing power and increased food prices account for the development.

Some members of the donor community confided in The Nation they want government to immediately launch an international appeal by declaring a state of disaster in the five districts so that relief agencies in the country can mobilise funds and compliment government efforts.

"But it looks like government is dragging its feet to make an appeal because of the potential embarrassment this revelations may have on the President who has been [honoured with] several awards in recognition to the country improved food situation," said one of the diplomats in Lilongwe yesterday.

"Government needs to raise at least K2 billion to avert the problems because the K100 million set aside in the budget for disaster preparedness is not adequate even in a case were 673,500 people require assistance," said another diplomat working for a relief agency.

But Deputy Minister for Agriculture Frank Mwenifumbo yesterday said that he does not see the reason why an emergency should be declared when the country registered another food surplus of 500,000 metric tonnes—which Mvac has revised to 378,000 tonnes.

"The President already ordered that food be moved to the food-deficit...districts...This country already has enough food to respond to the situation in the said areas and that is already happening," said Mwenifumbo.

"WFP and FAO should know that we have enough food and it's time they moved from food relief in Malawi to food production because they whole world has recognised us, even the UN, that

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Malawi is on course to achieving the MGD 1 [on food security]," said the deputy minister.


Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture said they were not surprised to hear about the Mvac report, saying they have all along told government that a lot of people are facing food shortages in rural Malawi.

"We as a committee have always reported to government that hunger is looming and, in fact, government has not listened," said committee chair Dzoole Mwale. But he said his committee has not yet seen the report.

"We were supposed to meet the Mvac team on Friday last week but the meeting failed," he said.

The subsidised farm input programme implemented by the Mutharika regime has in the last three years resulted into bumper yields which, apart from improving the food security nationally, has also pushed economic growth averaging 7 percent.

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