

GLOBAL AID NEEDED TO HELP PAKISTAN AVOID LOSING WHEAT CROP, SAYS UN AGENCY

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Without urgent global assistance to save the upcoming wheat-planting season in Pakistan, the food security of millions in the flood-hit nation is at risk, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned today.

Severe flooding, which has affected some 18 million people in Pakistan, has inundated land half the size of Italy and wiped out much of the country's household wheat seed stocks.

Wheat-based flat bread is the main food for the rural poor in Pakistan and planting is set to start this month, but more than half a million tons of wheat seed stocks have been destroyed by the floods.

"Food aid alone will not be enough," cautioned Daniele Donati, Chief of FAO's Emergency Operations in Asia, the Near East, Europe and Special Emergencies.

"Unless people get seeds over the next few weeks, they will not be able to plant wheat for a year." In some areas of Pakistan, the fertile top layer of soil has been washed away, making planting impossible, while in some other regions, land is waterlogged or covered in silt. But this is not the case in all parts of the country, FAO noted. Mr. Donati said that "in many areas, it will be possible to plant as soon as the water recedes."

If urgently-needed funding is received, FAO and its partners can get the seeds to the areas which need them, but the "window of opportunity is closing" since the planting season ends in mid-November, he said. So far, FAO has procured enough seeds for 200,000 farming families, and hopes that additional resources will allow them to provide seeds for double that number.

Early estimates indicated that 3.6 million hectares of maize, rice, sugar cane and cotton crops have been destroyed in the floods.

Additionally, 1.2 million livestock and 6 million poultry were lost in the heavy rains, and it is expected that more than 1 million buffalo, cattle, sheep and goats owned by people living in flooded areas are in danger of starvation unless they receive animal feed.

FAO also cautioned that without immediate vaccinations, the risk of spreading diseases, including food-and-mouth disease, is great as people and herds are fleeing inundated areas.

Also today, the agency reported that the recent drought in Russia resulted in a sharp rise in international wheat prices, pushing up global food prices.

The agency's Food Price Index (FFPI) climbed five per cent between July and August to 176, the highest since September 2008. Despite this rise, the Index is still 38 per cent lower than its peak in June 2008.

FAO also attributed higher sugar and oilseed prices to the rise in overall global food prices.

The agency also reported today that its forecast for cereal production worldwide for 2010 has been lowered by 41 million tons to 2,300 tons, but noted that even at this lower level, output for this year is still on track to be the third highest on record.

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