

OFDA
Disaster
Case Reports

Zambia Food Shortage
May 1980-February 1981

Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance
Agency for International Development
Washington, D.C. 20523

ZAMBIA - Food Shortage

Data

Date: May 1980 - February 1981 (FY 80-81)

Location: Senanga and Sesheke districts along border with Namibia and Angola in Zambia's Western Province.

No. Dead: 15

No. Affected: 23,000

Damage: Several thousand inhabitants of the Senanga and Sesheke districts suffered severe malnutrition as a result of widespread food shortages. At least fifteen people died of starvation and 48 died of measles.

The Disaster

The Senanga and Sesheke districts in Zambia's Western Province are located in the south and southwestern corner of the country, close to the borders of Angola and Namibia. This isolated, semi-desert area has been the scene of several incursions by non-Zambian military forces engaged in the conflict between Angola and South Africa. As a result of these hostilities, many district residents were forced to flee their homes and were unable to plant their maize crop. The hostilities followed two seasons of poor harvests in a region with no access to markets and barely adequate food supplies under normal conditions. As a result, some 23,000 people encompassing 438 villages were left without food, the majority surviving almost exclusively on tree roots, reeds, and water lily bulbs.

Landmines planted throughout the area, and especially along the secondary and tertiary roads, rendered the region inaccessible as few trucks of any make could traverse the sandy terrain off the main roads.

Diseases traditionally present in the region, including chronic malaria, diarrhea, scabies, and night-blindness (vitamin A deficiency), were aggravated by the lack of food and the population's reduced resistance. At least fifteen people were known to have died of starvation, and forty-eight died of measles. The villages of Imusho, Sinjembela, and Kaunga Mashî on the Angolan border were the hardest hit, as they were the most remote, and had populations in which more than fifty percent were under fourteen years of age.

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Action Taken by the Government of Zambia (GOZ)

The Government of Zambia was alerted to the critical food supply situation developing in Senanga and Sesheke districts by district health officers and voluntary agency workers as early as mid-June. By the end of July, news of deaths from starvation had reached the capital. The first bags of yellow maize for famine relief arrived at the offices of the District Governor in Senanga by mid-August, and distribution got underway by mid-September.

In early September, the GOZ established a famine relief committee, headed by the deputy for administration, to carry out famine relief in Senanga and Sesheke districts. At the same time, the GOZ allocated \$800,000 to purchase and distribute food, including 45,700 seventy-kilo bags of maize, 1,190 bags of groundnuts, 2,856 twenty-five kilo bags of milk, and 952 fifty kilo bags of salt. The food was transported to the authority of the district governor in Mongu.

The district governor's attempts to distribute the GOZ maize to the critical villages in the interior were hampered by transport limitations. The pontoon at the Zambezi River at Kalongola was old and had a limited capacity; it was replaced by a new pontoon in mid-December. The district governor had a fleet of four 4-wheel drive Romanian trucks which were unable to cross the sand without suffering major breakdowns, and one Benz truck. Because the famine districts were in the volatile border region, it was difficult to hire drivers to transport the food, and similarly difficult to obtain insurance for either the drivers or the trucks. The Zambian Army cleared the main road between Sengale and Sesheke of mines and was able to secure that immediate area. However, villages beyond the main road, where the food shortage was reported to be most acute, were virtually inaccessible. Delivery was attempted using helicopters, however, this proved to be highly inefficient, as the helicopters had limited carrying capacity and were quite costly.

Assistance Provided by the United States Government (USG)

In mid-December, the U.S. Mission in Lusaka fielded a survey team composed of the Vice Consul, the Regional Food for Peace officer, representatives of the Zambian Red Cross, and other USG personnel. The team travelled from Lusaka to the provincial capital at Mongu, south through Senanga and Sesheke districts along the west bank of the Zambezi River. As a result of the team's survey and assessment, the U.S. Ambassador made a disaster determination on December 30, 1980. The Ambassador authorized the use of his disaster authority and on January 12, agreed in principle to provide funding for the transport of GOZ maize stocks from depots in Western Province to the needy in Senanga and Sesheke.

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On January 9, a well respected local freight service began transporting the GOZ maize with the hope of beating the heavy rains and ensuing road flooding. Between January 9 and February 9, the freight service transported 1,090 MT (12,090 bags) of food, primarily maize, to Sioma, Kalongola, and Nangweshi main issuing centers in Senanga district, and Kalobolelwa issuing center in Sesheke, all points along the main Senanga-Sesheke road. Because of the flooding and land mines on the secondary roads, the freight service was unable to make deliveries to the hinterland.

From the distribution points the food was delivered to the countryside by GOZ army vehicles on patrol and by Catholic Secretariat and Lutheran World Service vehicles. People also walked up to 50 miles from their homes to the distribution centers.

The USG provided all funding for the transport of the food.

TOTAL \$76,744

Assistance Provided by the U.S. Voluntary Agencies

Catholic Secretariat - provided early reports of deteriorating health status of the population in the villages of Senanga and Sesheke districts, coordinated missionary relief efforts, and assisted in distribution of relief supplies by providing a large trailer truck to transport food provided by the GOZ and other voluntary agencies to Sioma. Catholic Secretariat contributed fish, beans, cooking oil, clothing, and medicines through Franciscan Sisters in Sioma and Sesheke.

Lutheran World Federation - contributed maize, dried fish, beans, sorghum, maize seed, and medicines. Provided two trucks, two farm tractors, and wagons to transport food from distribution points along the main road, to villages in the interior.

Assistance Provided by the International Community *

OXFAM - pledged \$24,000 to the relief efforts, of which \$7,500 was spent on medicines and clothing distributed by the Zambian Red Cross and Catholic Secretariat.

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Zambian Red Cross - delivered clothing and medicines to local government authorities and the Zambian Army for distribution.

TOTAL \$24,000

* Please note: the figure for total international assistance in an approximation. In many cases, the value of in kind aid is unavailable.

