

FEWS NET overviews

For an analysis of seasonal progress in southern Africa, see the back page

EAST AFRICA: October-December rains began on time but ended early in south-central Somalia, northeastern and southeastern Kenya, and in parts of southeastern Ethiopia, negatively affecting crop prospects and pasture in these areas. In south-central Somalia, increased civil insecurity and rampant sea piracy also continue to exacerbate existing food insecurity through displacement, disruption of both commercial and humanitarian food imports, and restrictions on food access among already impoverished populations. Persistent civil insecurity and the associated market disruptions also continue to negatively impact food security in parts of Ethiopia's Somali Region. In addition, unusually high rates of urban food insecurity have been observed in the region as a result of high food costs. Overall, an estimated 15 to 18 million people in East Africa require emergency assistance.

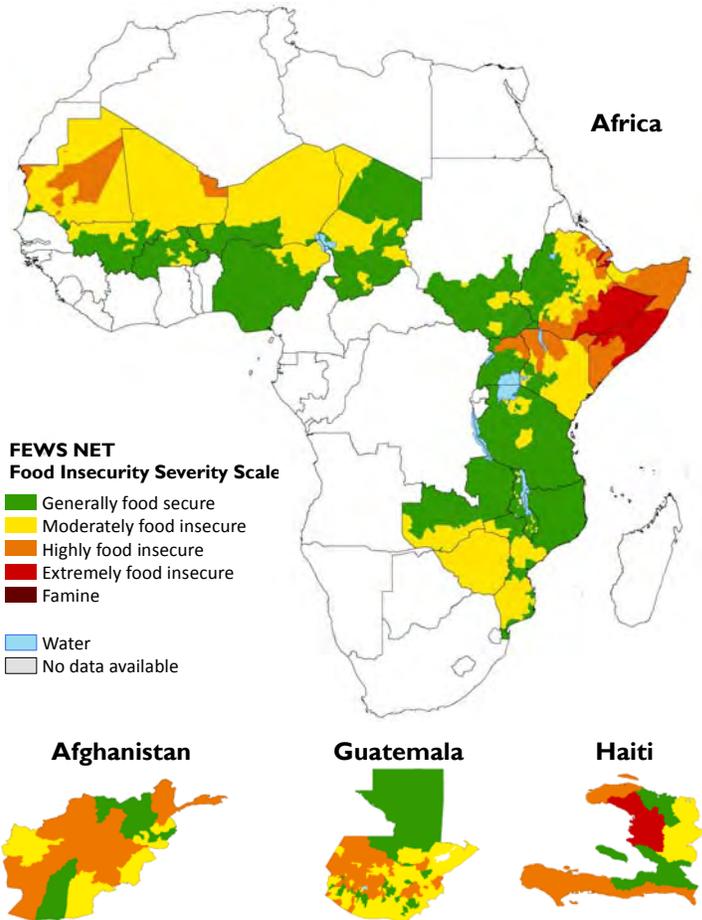
HAITI: Food security conditions in Haiti have stabilized three months after a series of storms in August and September 2008. Roughly half of the country is expected to benefit from at least average harvests (December-March) and declines in international food prices suggest that further deteriorations in food security are unlikely, given Haiti's heavy dependence on food imports. However, the joint appeal released earlier this year remains underfunded and additional resources are needed to support recovery and development activities.

WEST AFRICA: Following favorable agro-climatic conditions and both government and market incentives for production, record crop yields have been recorded in the Sahel and in West Africa for the 2008/09 season. Overall, cereal production in the region is estimated at 54 million tons. As a result, food prices have begun to decline across the region, although they remain above the five-year average in some markets. Despite the good harvest however, pockets of food insecurity remain. For example, in Chad, increased civil insecurity since August has constrained humanitarian access and affected crop production.

ZIMBABWE: The level of food insecurity continues to increase as the hunger season nears its peak. The ability to sell food in foreign currency has improved food availability, particularly in urban areas, as the level of informal food imports, now legal, rises to meet some of the gap left by the weak performance of formal commercial imports. However, those without access to foreign currency and with only limited access to the rapidly depreciating local currency face daily challenges accessing adequate food.

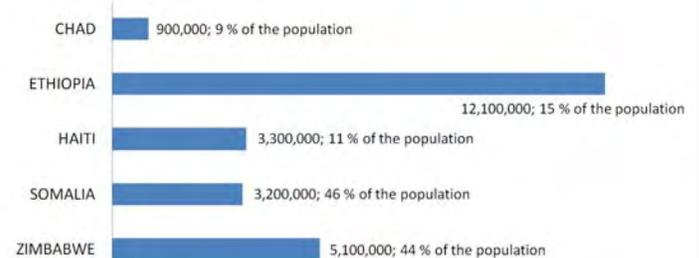
Current estimated food security conditions

October to December 2008

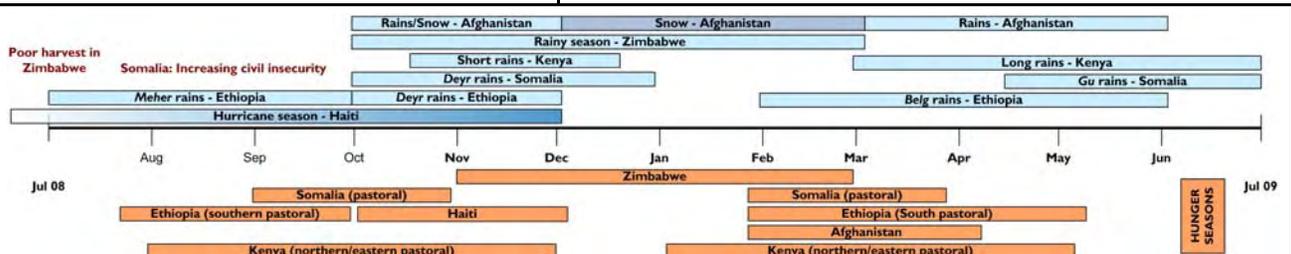


These maps show the highest estimated severity of food insecurity in each area, based on the latest assessment and monitoring data, as well as baseline data and analysis.

Selected food insecure populations



Critical events timeline



Erratic first half of season could reduce yields in parts of Southern Africa

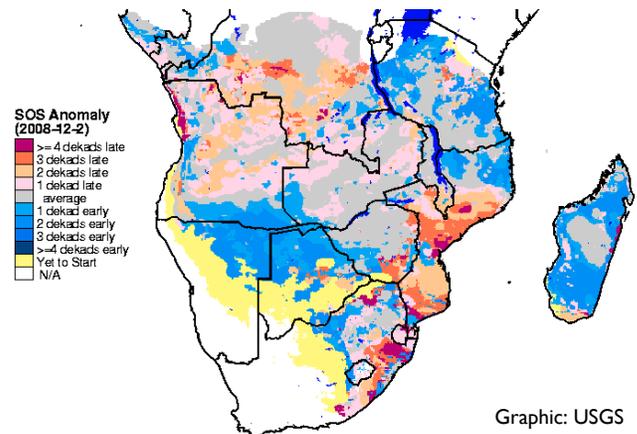
In southeastern parts of the southern Africa region, including central and southern Mozambique and eastern and southern Zimbabwe, seasonal planting was delayed 20-40 days past its normal starting point (mid-November) due to a lack of rainfall. Meanwhile, in eastern Botswana, eastern Swaziland, and parts of southern Zimbabwe, the season still has not begun. An analysis of recent cropping seasons identified eight years when planting was delayed to a similar degree as this year. During these eight years, crops completely failed three times in Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique and six times in the extreme southern areas of both countries. In areas where crops were planted late this year, the October-March seasonal rains will need to continue through at least the end of March to avoid crop losses, and harvests will be delayed, prolonging the hunger period.

Dry conditions persisted in most of central and southern Mozambique until the second dekade of December when the season finally began with torrential downpours. In a matter of days, cumulative seasonal rainfall totals rose to 150 to 400 percent of normal. This has led to localized flooding and damage to roads and infrastructure, which could further affect crop production. In coastal and nearby inland areas, increased cyclone activity due to warm sea surface temperatures over the Indian Ocean also poses a threat. Poor cereal yields in these areas would affect both food access and overall food availability as households in these areas rely heavily on agriculture and because the central region produces 54 percent of the country's maize. Seed availability is not expected to be a major constraint in these areas, but rains will need to continue through at least the end of March in order for late planted crops to reach maturity.

Southern Zimbabwe, including parts of Matabeleland and Masvingo provinces, eastern Botswana, and eastern Swaziland remain dry, with no effective start of season. These areas include much of the available farmland in Botswana and Swaziland. In Zimbabwe it includes rangelands and some marginal communal cropping areas, which do not contribute significantly to domestic production, but where crop production is important for local livelihoods and food security.

Although rains began on time in other parts of Zimbabwe, the productive potential for the current season is not favorable. Crop wilting in the southern two-thirds of the country, which followed erratic rainfall in November, was mitigated in many areas by significant rainfall in late December. However, crops were likely planted late in most areas, due to the very low availability of inputs this season, and rains will need to continue through at least the end of March for the late-planted crops to survive. However, even if adequate and well distributed rains are maintained over the next three months, Zimbabwe's maize production is expected to decline following a reduction in area

Figure 1. Start of Season Anomaly for Southern Africa



planted, due not only to shortages of seeds, but also to a lack of fertilizer, limited resources to hire labor, and an overall lack of investment in agriculture. Overall, cereal production is expected to be lower than even last season, when food deficits left over five million people in need of emergency food assistance. Higher levels of commercial, humanitarian, and, increasingly, informal food imports are expected to be required in the next year (April 2009-March 2010).

In Zambia, northern Mozambique, and most of Malawi, the season began on time and crop conditions are favorable. However, in South Africa, farmers have indicated that they intend to reduce area planted to maize by 8.5 percent this season. This could tighten regional food availability next year, particularly in Zimbabwe, which depends heavily on maize imports from South Africa to meet domestic consumption needs.

The recently revised regional rainfall forecast for December 2008 to February 2009, the period when the majority of the season's rainfall occurs, has been updated, and now indicates an increased probability of normal to above-normal rainfall over much of the region, with the exception of eastern portions of southern and northern Mozambique. More immediately, the forecast from December 23, 2008 to January 8, 2009 calls for heavy rains in excess of 200-400 mm over Zimbabwe, central and southern Mozambique, Swaziland, and the maize triangle of South Africa. There is also now an increased likelihood that a *La Niña* will develop, a phenomenon associated with wetter conditions and possibly an extended season. Nevertheless, the erratic nature of the current season over several areas in the southeast of the region – a late start followed by excessively heavy rainfall – could contribute to cereal deficits in localized areas. In Zimbabwe, it is possible that next year's emergency food needs could be even higher than in the current year, while in Mozambique, some form of food assistance could again be required for households in areas where late-planted crops do not perform well.