

# HUNGRY, ARMED, AND DANGEROUS

## The Global Food Crisis and the Future of African Conflict

by Jon Rosen

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For those keeping score, the first half of 2008 did not bring encouraging news for the political future of sub-Saharan Africa. In January, accusations of presidential vote-rigging plunged Kenya, East Africa’s economic powerhouse, into a month-long spate of ethnically-motivated violence, giving Kenyans a taste of what continues to be the norm in neighboring Somalia and the nearby Darfur region of Sudan. In Chad and Sudan, rebels advanced on—or near—their heavy-handed governments’ capitals, while the prospect of a renewed war between Ethiopia and Eritrea heightened, and Robert Mugabe, Africa’s most notorious autocrat of the day, appeared ready to use all means at his disposal to extend his disastrous 28-year rule in Zimbabwe.

Still, many Africa experts argue, the most alarming development of the year so far may have less to do with repressed ethnic minorities or intransigent kleptocrats than with the changing global consumption of staple commodities. The global food crisis of 2008, precipitated by the drastic increase in world grain prices, has already fueled conflict in a number of African states. But this, says Winrich Kühne, adjunct professor of International Relations at the Bologna Center and director of the German Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF) Berlin, may just mark the beginning of the continent’s next great calamity.

“High food prices will only increase the tendency of state failure and exacerbate ongoing conflicts,” Kühne explains. “This poses big

problems in Africa because household budgets are so limited. This is not just a problem of the poor. The middle classes in Africa are being hit hard too.”

Yet, for those roughly 390 million sub-Saharan Africans living in absolute poverty—defined as getting by on less than \$1 per day—the situation is most dire. With the prices of rice, wheat, and maize nearly doubling in the past year, many such households have been forced to eliminate meat from their diets, and in some cases, get by on just one meal per day. In Somalia, where a collapsed state, inadequate rainfall, and failed harvests spelled humanitarian crisis even before the global spike in commodities, the *New York Times* reported recently of villagers “trying to stave off starvation with a thin gruel made from mashed thorn tree branches.” According to a statement in May by the United Nations’ Food Security Analysis Unit, half the population of Somalia will likely need food aid by the end of the year.

So far, the only political casualty of this “silent tsunami,” as the director of the World Food Program has coined the food crisis, is former Haitian Prime Minister Jacques-Édouard Alexis, who resigned in April after a week of protesters chanting “we’re hungry.” Yet food-related strife has sprung up across the globe, including in Africa, where deadly riots have taken place in Somalia, Senegal, and Cameroon. In Kenya, a country in a precarious state of political compromise since the violence that killed 1,500 and left some 600,000 displaced after the December 2007 disputed elections,

tensions are on edge. It is in countries like this, says Kühne, with fragile political arrangements, where the threat of food-related violence is most acute. “The crisis is more of a risk to countries undergoing a delicate transition to democracy,” he says, “than to a country like Zimbabwe, where the oppressive machinery is still quite strong.”

As governments such as Kenya’s now debate their own policies aimed at both quelling riots and feeding their populations, the international community has begun to coordinate policy for tackling the crisis, starting with short-term emergency food aid. Though a UN Conference in Rome this June failed to institute any concrete steps forward, an early 2008 appeal by the World Food Program for US\$755 million—needed to offset the effects of food inflation on its emergency aid programs—proved largely successful. By June, it had collected US\$1.2 billion, thanks in part to a US\$500 million, first-of-its-kind gift from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Still, it is the long-term effects of the problem that are the most troubling, since the crisis, unlike past food upheavals in Africa, is not the result of a particular crop failure or government policy, but of fundamental shifts in global commodity supply and demand, pointing toward a future of sustained higher commodity prices. The United States’ rapidly-expanding, subsidized production of ethanol, which has indelibly linked the world price of corn to that of oil, has combined with growing demand for meat and grain among emerging middle classes in Asia, and trade-distorting subsidies in the U.S., Europe, and Japan, to bring about this new food price parity. It does not help, as Kühne notes, that African countries have “completely neglected improving agriculture,” by failing to invest in technologies to negate the widespread problem of agriculture-induced land degradation, which in some places has greatly reduced crop yields.

It is through such innovation that many experts see the only long-term solution to the problem, particularly as little progress has been made toward eliminating Western agricultural subsidies, which prop up global crop prices, and effectively keep developing countries out of global agricultural markets. One difficulty with this, according to Kenneth H. Keller, Bologna Center director and professor of International Policy, is that as technologies advance in the West, the focus of technological development is often irrelevant to the needs of developing countries. “Many of the innovations of the Western world aren’t translatable in Africa,” Keller says, noting that, in some cases, they can even be counterproductive, as the world has learned the hard way with ethanol. While a number of Western governments, realizing the need to spark a second so-

called “green revolution,” have now pledged to develop agricultural technologies—seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation systems—specific to the African context, this may create additional problems as well as solutions. “The West tends to offer technologies that increase the productivity of labor,” Keller explains. “But increased productivity reduces labor needs.” And a country full of unemployed workers may be just as vulnerable to political strife as a country full of hungry ones.”

“What Africa needs most,” Keller argues, “is infrastructure and education to develop people with technical competence. Where the Western world can help is to build the capacity of Africans to absorb new technology. The capacity to receive is as important as the will to give.”

Of course, as Keller would admit, such institutional capacity building—as it’s known in development jargon—is a long-term solution to a problem with acute, short-term consequences. In the coming months, faced with higher prices of energy, fertilizer, and other key inputs, farmers in developing countries—who might otherwise benefit from high agricultural prices—are likely to plant less, which may only lead to more severe food shortages. It’s a catch-22 that may have disastrous consequences for Africa’s poor, and the precarious political realities of many African states. ■

(Opposite page)  
An example of desertification,  
a phenomenon that has reduced  
crop yields across Africa

(Below)  
A rice seller in a food market  
in sub-Saharan Africa



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