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**FAO EMERGENCY OPERATIONS AND REHABILITATION DIVISION
UN REGIONAL INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION AND SUPPORT OFFICE (RIACSO)**

Update on Current Agricultural Season: Southern Africa

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1 Overall View of the 2005/06 Season

The 2005/06 crop season has been better than average in most countries of the region. Rainfall, though generally late, persisted long enough to ensure that even late planted crops had sufficient moisture to complete their growth cycle. An exception to this general good picture was in southern Angola, in the provinces of Kwanza Sul, Benguela, Huila, Namibe and Cunene, where there was a long dry period in January/February which destroyed many crops of maize, sorghum, millet, groundnuts and beans. Rains were also lower than normal in South Eastern districts of Zimbabwe, especially Chiredzi.

Leaching of nitrogen by heavy rains in January and February left crops in a yellowed state and reduced yields considerably. Brown rust of maize was at an all-time high in Swaziland.

2 Country by country update

2.1 Angola

Rainfall in the northern areas of Angola was above normal, while in the centre and south it was below normal. As noted above, the provinces of Kwanza Sul, Benguela, Huila, Namibe and Cunene were adversely affected by a month-long drought in January and February and this is estimated to have caused up losses of between one quarter and one third of the crops in Kwanza Sul Province. In Benguela Province, some farmers are estimated to have only two to three months' food supplies. Up to 90 percent of 20 285 families were affected by the drought in Caimbambo Municipality, while 80 percent of families in Cubal Municipality are considered vulnerable as a result and need food assistance. Eighteen people have died in this area from eating

Anthrax infected meat since October, 2005. In Cunene Province, crops were planted late, due to late rains, and then succumbed to drought. It is estimated that 37 percent of the population of 266 811 people in Cunene Province will need food assistance.¹

There is a taboo against irrigated farming in some of the areas concerned and this militates against the use of irrigation. Some means must be found to counter this taboo, as there is a good supply of irrigation water available in many of these municipalities.

2.2 Zimbabwe

Area planted to maize is estimated to have risen from 1.2 to 1.3 million ha this year. Plantings of small grains (sorghum and millet) are greatly increased from 180 000 ha in the previous season to 290 000 ha this year.

Rains have been widespread all over Zimbabwe this year with all but the south-eastern districts of Chiredzi and parts of Mwenzezi and Chipinge which received less than 75 percent of normal rainfall. The heavy rainfall caused difficulties in timely weeding such that some crop yields will be reduced.

Shortages of tillage services and fertilizer affected production in communal areas. In particular oxen condition was very poor after the prolonged drought in 2004/05, delaying the process and therefore forcing to postpone the first planting. This is particularly valid for the most vulnerable households, who do not own draught animals and have to hire tillage services.

Availability of maize seed was not limiting (nearly 50,000MT, close to all time record), apart from localised shortages. However, many households could simply not afford the cost. Shortage of legume seeds was also recorded.

Contrary to early fears for a major crop infestation, army worm affected only an estimated 1000 ha of crops.

Grazing availability is generally good, but cattle are affected by ticks, as dipping facilities are in poor condition and availability of dips is far from optimal.

2.3 Zambia

Heavy rains have continued well into April in Eastern Province, but the rains have now stopped elsewhere. Some cob rotting is feared in Eastern Province because of late rains. Flooding on the Ngwezi River, near Kazungula damaged local crops in late March and early April.

National maize production in 2004/05 season was estimated by the CFSAM at 820 000 tonnes, but this is expected to be comfortably exceeded this year. Production of maize in the 2003/04 season was estimated at 1 214 000 tonnes. Many crops seen were lacking in nitrogen fertilizer and this will reduce potential yield. The cost of

¹ Report of the Multisectoral Mission “ United Against Hunger” from March 1st to March 20th, 2006.

fertilizer is well beyond the means of farmers in Zambia and FAO is promoting the introduction of Conservation Agriculture as a means of protecting soil organic matter with the aim of improving the water and nutrient holding capacity of the soil. CA also reduces the cost of tillage, especially after the first season.

2.4 Malawi

Area planted to maize this year, at 1.6 million ha, is 5.7 percent above that of last year. Rainfall to 20th March was 69.2 percent of normal in Northern Region, 84.2 percent of normal in Central Region and 113.3 percent of normal in Southern Region, but since then Malawi has experienced late and widespread unseasonal rainfall, which in some cases may cause cob rots.

The Government supported a subsidy scheme for fertilizer and this made fertilizer affordable for many farmers in almost all parts of the country. A total of 54 356 tonnes of basal dressing, 51 136 tonnes of urea and 6013 tonnes of Calcium Ammonium Nitrate were made available under this scheme. The scheme covered up to 90 percent of the market, leaving only 10 percent for the private fertilizer sector.² As a result of this and improved rainfall compared to last year, average yields are expected to be in the 1.5 t/ha region. Last year's maize production was 1.259 million tonnes, well below the national requirement of around 2 million tonnes.

No major pest or disease problems were reported during March and April.

The heavy late rainfall will be good for winter crops.

2.5 Mozambique

After the reduction from normal rainfall patterns early in the season in the northern districts of Nampula, Niassa and Cabo Delgado, later rains have ensured that crops in these important grain growing districts have completed their growth cycle. FAO provided inputs through Input Trade Fairs to 9 000 families in these three districts and this, no doubt, helped to improve the harvest outcome for these families.

Estimated cereal area for 2005/06 season is composed of 1 471 177 ha maize, 542 269ha sorghum, 97 337 ha millets and 193 986 ha of paddy rice. Lack of nitrogen is a major constraint to crop production and FAO is countering this problem by promoting conservation agriculture as a means of improving water and nutrient holding capacity of the soils. Results so far are very encouraging, but the old problem of lack of working capital or credit collateral still prevents farmers from investing in the fertilizers and improved seeds that are needed for increased production. Marketing of surplus maize may be a problem in Zambezia.

2.6 Swaziland

² Food Security Joint Task Force: Technical Secretariat. Minutes of Meeting on 'Evaluation of the Fertilizer Subsidy Programme by CISANET'. 30th March, 2006.

It is estimated that only 45-50 percent of available land is being used for farming each year. The reasons for this are many, but lack of working capital due to lack of collateral is a major one. Lack of labour is another with the high incidence of HIV/AIDS exacerbating the problem. FAO Input Trade Fairs, funded by DFID, were instrumental in getting inputs to 9 820 farm families enabling them to plant a crop and given the good late rains, these farmers have succeeded in obtaining a reasonable harvest.

Crops in the highlands are generally good, but leaching of nitrogen caused by heavy rains will reduce yield potential. Shortages of seed of alternative crops to cereals hampered crop diversification, especially in the dry south of the country, but some good crops of maize and especially, sorghum, were seen in the south of the country. Sorghum is much more suited to this area than maize.

The wet conditions in Swaziland have favoured the spread of Brown Rust and Grey Leaf Spot is also common. Late planted crops of maize in the lowveld have probably received enough rain now to produce a reasonable crop.

It is likely that Government's maize production forecast in December, 2005, for the 2005/06 maize harvest to reach 67 000 tons, will be exceeded this year.

2.7 Lesotho

Rainfall for the whole country has been above normal this season and this will also create a favourable environment for the main winter crops of wheat and peas. Last year's total cereal production of 92 129 tonnes is likely to be exceeded, but official estimates are not yet available.

Large areas of potentially arable land have been left fallow, and this occurs every year, due to lack of working capital, HIV/AIDS incidence and other factors. High yields of maize are reported from 160 ha of land in various plots around Maseru, which has been managed by a Catholic nun. These yields have been made possible by correct planting, efficient use of herbicides (four hand-held Ultra Low Volume sprayers were used immediately following the four – row planter to spray Primagram, an effective pre-emergence spray, which prevented the growth of weeds and so reduced crop competition. This shows that Lesotho soils are capable of producing high yields if all the rules of good farming are applied. Similarly, on poorer soils, farmers in Qacha's Nek district will obtain high yields from their plots which are farmed using Conservation Agriculture techniques, while neighbouring farms, using conventional techniques, fail to produce a good yield.

A striking feature of many crops is the poor quality of weeding, with many crops established but never weeded at all. This affected the Government's mechanised conservation agriculture blocks, but also many individually owned fields, especially in the south of the country, in the districts of Mafeteng, Mohale's Hoek and Quthing. Fully half the maize crops in these three districts will, partly as a result of no weeding, produce little or no yield. The reasons why farmers go to the trouble and expense of preparing land and planting, only to abandon the crops then, need to be investigated.

Good rainfall has also assisted the livestock industry, with better than average grazing for the large flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle. No major disease outbreaks are reported and FAO is providing sufficient acaricide to inject all sheep in the country against the parasitic mite that causes Sheep Scab.

2.8 Namibia

Rainfall in Namibia was higher than for many years this season, with some areas of the country, especially in the south-west receiving 300 percent of normal rainfall. Planting was late because of the late onset of rain and some crops in Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Oshikoto still require rain to finish their growth cycle. Total area planted to cereals in 2005/06 is estimated at 386 700 ha, an increase of 47.6 percent over last year's total of 262 000 ha. The areas planted to the different cereals is as follows:- Millet, 208 038 ha, sorghum, 175 345 ha and maize 6 281 ha, with all maize being grown in Caprivi Region. Plantings in Caprivi are 68 percent above last year, with Kavango up 45 percent, Omusati up 28 percent, Oshana up 53 percent and Ohangwena up 18 percent. The total harvest last year was estimated at 97 000 tonnes, made up of 53 900 tonnes of millet/sorghum, 2 500 tonnes of wheat and 40 600 tonnes of white maize, with most of the maize and all of the wheat being produced by the commercial sector.

Commercial plantings are thought to be similar to those of the previous year but figures were not available yet.

The good rains, together with high export demand for cattle both on the hoof and as meat, has resulted in good prices for cattle. Exports of live cattle to South Africa are estimated to have doubled to around 180 000 head. The abattoir in Katima Mulilo is working at full capacity. The heavy rains have favoured the spread of a number of biting insects, one of which is the vector for Lumpy Skin Disease, a virus disease for which there is a vaccine.

2.9 South African Maize and Other Crop Production

Maize prices in South Africa have been rising and now stand at R1141/ton³ as a result of concerns over crop damage due to waterlogging following excessive rains in the main growing areas. White maize futures for July 2006 now stand at R1 161 per ton. Total commercial white maize production estimates have been revised lower at 3.7 million tons compared to 3.8 million tons previously. Total commercial production of both white and yellow maize is now estimated at 6.06 million tonnes, a reduction of 2.5 percent below previous estimates and 47 percent lower than last year's bumper crop.

The Crop Estimates Committee of the Ministry of Agriculture estimates that developing agriculture farmers will produce a further 238 426 tonnes of white maize from 345 881 ha of land in 2006.

³ Farmer's Weekly, 7th April, 2006.

Sorghum production is estimated at 85 655 tonnes compared to 260 000 tons in 2004/05. Soya production is up considerably at 372 520 tonnes, compared to 272500 tonnes last year.⁴

3 Conclusion

- Apart from concerns regarding the effects of drought in Central and Southern Angola, most countries are reporting a good harvest in 2006.
- Crop yields are very low in most countries, but the potential for increased yields has been well demonstrated this year in Lesotho. If farming operations are done in time and the correct inputs are used in the right way, yields of up to 5 tons/ha are possible. It might be argued that if farmers concentrated scarce inputs and labour on smaller areas and farmed these areas better, the results could be much better than those being achieved under the present farming system. Better use could be made of available manure and fertilizer.

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⁴ Figures from Crop Estimates Committee of Ministry of Agriculture, Private Bag X246, Pretoria.