

Summit targets global food crisis

A key UN-sponsored summit is set to open in Rome aimed at addressing the problem of soaring global food prices.

Food costs are the highest in 30 years, causing riots in dozens of countries.

UN officials said Secretary General Ban Ki-moon would call for the immediate suspension or elimination of price controls or other trade restrictions.

But many observers have so far focused on Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, whose presence at the summit has been called "obscene" by the UK and Australia.

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said the Zimbabwean president was "the person who has presided over the starvation of his people".

Biofuel issue

The hosts of the Rome conference - the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) - has warned the industrialised countries that unless they increase yields, eliminate barriers and move food to where it is needed most, a global catastrophe could result.

The recent crisis is believed to have pushed another 100 million people into hunger worldwide.

Poorer countries are faced with a 40% increase in their food imports bill this year.

The BBC's Christian Fraser in Rome says the FAO is calling on donor countries to dig deeper - to help farmers in developing countries get access to fertiliser, seeds and the animal feed they require.

The FAO says the problem of chronic underinvestment in agriculture can no longer be ignored.

Ahead of the conference, the Islamic Development Bank said at a meeting in Saudi Arabia that it would spend \$1.5bn (£760m) over five years to help the least developed Muslim countries tackle the food crisis.

One area expected to generate disagreements in Rome is biofuel - most of the increase in maize production last year went into making fuels such as ethanol, not food.

Mr Ban intends to ask the US and other countries to phase out subsidies that encourage farmers to produce for fuel.

UN officials said there would be a range of "confidence-building" options for governments.

The taskforce Mr Ban created to target the food crisis is expected to present a 38-page report with measures that could cost up to \$15bn (£7.5bn) to implement.

It will contain short and long-term measures.

In the short term, the report will call for a reduction in tariffs and the provision of subsidies for poorer farmers.

The long-term measures will focus on increased investment.

'Cascade' risk

On the eve of the summit, Mr Ban said "we are literally paying the price" for overlooking investment in agriculture.

"If not handled properly, this issue could trigger a cascade of other crises - affecting economic growth, social progress, and even political security around the world," he warned.

HAVE YOUR SAY

John, Yelm, Washington, USA

The main causes of the rising food prices include rising demand from fast-developing countries, higher oil costs, and global warming.

Officials will hope the plight of the poor diverts attention away from the presence of Mr Mugabe.

Mr Mugabe and his ministers are usually subject to a European Union travel ban - but he is able to attend UN forums.

It is his first visit to Europe since the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) won a majority in parliamentary elections in March.

He faces a presidential run-off on 27 June against MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Mr Mugabe's supporters have been accused of attacking MDC activists, leaving at least 50 dead.

Zimbabwe used to be a net food exporter but now suffers from chronic food shortages.

How can the problem of global food prices be tackled? Should price controls and trade restrictions be eliminated? Tell us your thoughts on the summit in Rome by filling in the form below.

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