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Famine prevails despite sufficient food

Even though food is cheaper and more plentiful than ever in the history of humankind, some 10 million people will still starve in Africa south of the Sahara this year.

Worldwide, 900 million people suffer from malnutrition and a further 1 billion people have chronic illnesses owing to a lack of micronutrients. This is according to Ian Mann, strategist of the consultants group Gateways in Johannesburg.

Mann says, in contrast to the 1880s when there was not enough food available, globalisation of the feeding system, transport, trade and new methods to preserve food has changed the situation. – www.landbou.com

Foot-and-mouth disease at Beit Bridge

Foot-and-mouth disease broke out in the Beit Bridge district at the end of August after 25 buffalo with this disease moved from the Kruger National Park in South Africa to Zimbabwe, the department of veterinarian services in Zimbabwe stated.

According to a story on AllAfrica.com the department is in a state of alert after cases were diagnosed in the Tshikwala Kwala, Malungudzi and Malipati districts.

Apparently, the buffalo originated in Zimbabwe, which were exposed to cattle in the Tshikwala Kwala district after which the disease spread when the animals were sold. – www.landbou.com

Biofuels to increase food production

Planting biofuel crops need not damage capacity to grow food and could even enhance food security, according to a controversial review prepared for the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA).

The report, with case studies on six countries in East, West and Southern Africa, concludes that bioenergy production can expand across the continent and provide income and energy to farmers without displacing food crops.

Potential conflicts between bioenergy and food needs can be addressed with the right approaches, said Rocio Diaz-Chavez, a researcher at Imperial College, London, and lead author of Mapping Food and Bioenergy in Africa. – <http://bioenergy.checkbiotech.org>

China 'not that big a force in Africa'

China is among the most active investors in Africa, but developed countries still account for most foreign direct investment (FDI) into the continent, according to the 2010 World Investment Report. The research, undertaken by the UN Conference on Trade and Development, shows South Africa – and not China – was the biggest emerging market investor in Africa between 2006 and 2008 with \$2,6 billion (R19,3 billion) of average annual FDI flows.

However, developed nations accounted for by far the bulk of estimated inward FDI flows into Africa, contributing 72% of inflows between 2000 and 2008, and 92% of inward stock in 2008. – www.busrep.co.za

Children die in Nigerian lead poisoning

As many as 30 children died of lead poisoning in northern Nigeria at the end of August alone, authorities believe. Scores of people – mostly children – have already died this year in Zamfara state, poisoned by lead-contaminated waste from illegal gold mining. The latest deaths occurred in a remote village near the town of Anka.

However, officials have not been able to confirm the reports because rainy-season

downpours have prevented them from reaching the area. Lead poisoning has killed at least 160 since June, when visiting doctors realised children in the region were dying in unusually large numbers.

Investigating scientists traced the source of the poisoning to soil contaminated with lead, which had been dumped in water sources by miners.

There are fears that the rains may have washed the poison back into wells and other water sources.

In their attempts to extract gold, deadly amounts of lead were released – it is thought that soil containing lead deposits was dumped in water sources and in places where children played.

The deaths were discovered during the country's annual immunisation programme, when officials realised that in several villages there were virtually no children.

Villagers said the children had died of malaria and it was only when a team from international aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières took blood tests from local people that the high concentrations of lead were discovered. – www.bbc.co.uk

Cotton farmers disillusioned

Despite the Kenian government's efforts to lure more farmers into cotton farming, many are still sceptical about the crop they once treasured. Some who had decided to grow the crop are slowly doing away with it in Siaya District, despite government promises that good things are on the way for cotton farmers.

Lwanida Adongo Otiende from south-central Alego location, Siaya District, reduced her cotton acreage from 4 to 2 early this year, because of a lack of market and poor pricing.

Otiende, who has been a cotton farmer for more than 10 years, blames the government for not helping the industry in its hour of need, especially in sourcing for market.

She challenges government to subsidise the price of cottonseeds and chemicals to lure farmers back to farming the crop. "Government should also embark on a campaign to sensitise farmers on growing the crop," she says.

Her sentiments were echoed by Coren Olero, a former south-central location chief, who owns about two acres of cotton on his land.

Olero, who doubles up as the south-central cotton growers self-help group chairman, says lack of a market for cotton has led most farmers to venture into other profit-oriented activities. – www.nation.co.ke

Business loans for women

More women are now benefiting from micro-financing credit in Africa.

Traditionally, the history of inequality has often assumed that there is a shortage of female business proprietors in the continent.

According to Guido Boysen, chief investment officer of micro-financier GroFin, the trend has changed rapidly. "Contrary to popular belief, there are more female entrepreneurs in Africa than in the rest of the world," he said.

Most of micro-finance borrowers are women and they have been a driving force in this sector, with financial institutions committed to empowering them in their communities.

For them, agriculture dominates as the business of choice in many regions of the continent.

However, although the level of women participation in micro-financing has been going up, they are yet to tap into the opportunities available for growth finance.

"Many African businesswomen battle to make the transition from a small (informal) business to a small and medium enterprise (SME). This is because of social factors and access to finance and expertise," said Boysen.

A significant amount of breadwinners' wages in a number of African households is spent on pressing family expenses, instead of being channelled back into the business. – www.nation.co.ke 