

PRESS RELEASE

FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA UNDER SERIOUS THREAT

“The government will have to realise that food security in South Africa and its neighbouring countries is under such a threat at the moment that the region is heading for a serious food crisis. Food production in most of the southern African countries is in jeopardy because of lower commodity prices, high production costs as well as additional consequences of the international financial crisis,” according to Mr Fanie Brink, an agriculture and biofuels consultant.

If South Africa does not produce enough maize during the following season, it could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe in many of its neighbouring countries such as Swaziland, Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The world food reserves are at the lowest level in many years and food stocks are available for only 50 days. The very steep increases in food prices over the past year have also forced many countries to place a ban on the export of food to other countries.

Maize producers do not have a choice but to scale down the production of maize from 2,8 million this season to 2 million hectares during the coming season as they will not financially survive another surplus maize crop at lower export parity prices any longer. This will mean that South Africa, as many other African countries, is in danger to become a permanent importer of a basic staple food such as maize. Especially if the government keeps on believing that a subsistence level of farming and emerging farmers can produce enough food for the country and its neighbours. Most of the countries in Africa have already proven the fact that a subsistence level of farming is one of the main reasons for famine and that even the humanitarian aid measures of the United Nations, the World Bank and other aid organisations have totally failed to eradicate human suffering and famine on the continent. The transfer of land to black people in South Africa in what ever way and for what ever reason will not bring an end to the crippling poverty among rural communities, but will only increase poverty as it will have a very negative impact of food production.

The final maize crop estimate was released by the Department of Agriculture last month. A total crop of 12,02 million tons is expected this season which will, according to the preliminary figures, be the third biggest maize crop produced in the history of the country, after the 14,4 million tons produced in 1980/81 and the just bigger crop of 12,06 million tons produced in the 1993/94 season. This year's crop could well be the second biggest in history once the total crop is harvested and the final figures are calculated later this year. The average yield of 4,3 tons per hectare which was produce this season on an area of only 2,799 million hectares, is an all time record for maize production in South Africa. The total crop produced in the 1980/81 season was planted on 4,338 million hectares with an average yield of only 3,3 tons per hectare, whilst the total crop in the 1993/94 season yielded an average of just 3,1 tons per hectare on an area of 3,904 million hectares planted to maize.

Maize producers have shown their excellence with the increase in their production efficiency, but unfortunately this efficiency has led to the devastating consequences of the same old problem of a maize surplus and unprofitable producer prices in an excellent production season.

The total maize crop that emerging maize farmers will produce this season on an area of 498 thousand hectares will amount, according to the latest estimate, to only

464 thousand tons or less than 4% of the total crop with an average yield of less than 1 ton (0,93 tons) per hectare.

The only way in which the government can avert the possibility of a serious food shortage and a humanitarian crisis in the southern African region next year, is to introduce a floor price in the market as soon as possible at which maize farmers in South Africa will be willing to plant the same (2,8 million hectare) or a larger area to maize this coming season than the previous season. The government can at the same time make an offer to the United Nations and the World Bank to buy any possible surplus maize at the floor price next year for other countries in southern Africa who will in any case not be able to plant enough maize for themselves during this coming season.

The production of maize in South Africa has already been scaled down from 4,5 million hectares in the middle of the seventies to 2,8 million hectares last season. The area planted to wheat was scaled down from 2 million hectares in eighties to less than a million hectares over the past couple of seasons. South Africa and its neighbouring countries are without any doubt heading for a serious food crisis if maize farmers were to further scale down the production of maize this season. The government and consumers will also have to realise that the price of maize could increase by at least another R1200 a ton or even more if the country has to import maize next year, especially if the exchange rate should depreciate any further.

“The main question is whether the government could accept the fact that the down scaling of food production in the country will have to be turned around in order to be in a position to guarantee food security in South Africa and to avert the country from becoming a permanent importer of basic staple foods.”

The invitation by the Minister of Agriculture last week to commercial farmers in South Africa to assist Zimbabwe with the production of food should be embraced by commercial farmers, as well as the international production input companies in South Africa who could support the process with the best available technology. Such a step could enhance the local commercial agriculture industry in southern Africa and it could also be the beginning for South African farmers to position themselves in the region to address the further threatening problem of famine. This step could also speed up the transformation of the subsistence level of farming in southern Africa to a commercial level of agriculture in which the expertise and skills of commercial farmers in South Africa could play a decisive role.

“The time has come for a new vision to collaborate and co-operate with partners in the production of food to join hands in a bigger organisation such as a “Commercial Agriculture Alliance for Africa” with specific objectives to increase the production of food on a commercial basis in Africa in co-operation with the United Nations, the World Bank and the international development community. An Alliance with further objectives such as the manufacturing of production inputs in Africa itself, the availability of production finance and the development of new and bigger markets for agriculture products, while at the same time also protecting and enhancing the constitutional rights of commercial producers as well as the basic human right of millions of people in Africa to food security.”

Any interested and supportive proposals and suggestions for the establishment of such an Alliance as mentioned above could be forward to Fanie Brink at fanie@agriportal.co.za.