

# UN appeal for southern Africa draws a blank

**Andrew Meldrum in Pretoria**  
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Not one penny has been pledged to the United Nations emergency appeal to avert a famine threatening 10 million people in southern Africa, the world body has said.

The UN launched a plea for \$88m (£48m) at the end of August for food and agricultural assistance to six countries in the region.

"Ten days later, we have received zero pledges for this appeal. It seems we are losing the battle for the world's attention to get help to these vulnerable people," said Jan Egeland, the UN's humanitarian chief. He told the Guardian that, without timely donations, many people could die - as they have in Niger.

He was most concerned about Malawi, where 4.2 million people were in need of immediate food aid.

"We are trying to break the world's wall of silence regarding hunger in Malawi," said Mr Egeland. "It is not a Niger situation yet, but we want to prevent that tragic situation from happening again."

Malawi's chronic food shortages had created a situation in which 45% of children under five were stunted. UN figures show that a third of the total population is undernourished.

Mr Egeland said that across southern Africa, 10 million lives were at stake, including four million people in Zimbabwe and others in Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zambia.

The United Nations wants the donor community to act now on southern Africa while there is still a chance to avoid a crisis such as the one in Niger, where warnings of looming disaster went unheeded for too long.

Mr Egeland said the United States, Japan and some European countries were giving aid to southern Africa, but it was not enough.

He called on oil-rich nations to be more generous. "They have had windfall earnings in this last year," he said. "We can save a life for \$1 a day. There is no better investment in the world."

Other relief specialists echoed Mr Egeland's warnings. "Southern Africa is the most pressing humanitarian crisis today," said James Morris, director of the UN's World Food Programme, after visiting the region last month.

Yesterday, his agency said hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people in Mozambique would go hungry unless the international community made positive steps to tackle the food deficit.

Oxfam has also issued an urgent appeal for southern Africa, saying neglect now could result in disaster. The charity has begun distributing food in Malawi and will supply seeds to farmers in the region.

"Niger was forecast six months in advance, yet rich countries did almost nothing until the 11th hour. People died as a direct result," said Neil Townsend, Oxfam's humanitarian coordinator for southern Africa. "Now there is an impending crisis in southern Africa. If rich countries wait to give money, once again, until television crews show children dying, people in southern Africa will pay the price of their neglect."

The international agencies linked the region's food shortage to poor rains and high rates of HIV/Aids.

In Zimbabwe, however, many critics of President Robert Mugabe place the blame squarely on his mismanagement of agriculture in a country once regarded as a regional breadbasket.

"Zimbabwe's decline in maize production has been dramatically greater than its neighbours over the past five years," said the Washington-based Centre for Global Development.

"The policy of land seizures and the chaotic disruptions on the farms is likely the main reason the staple maize production fell by three-quarters."

However, the drastic drop in Zimbabwe's food production has not only been caused by the seizures of white-owned farms. The Mugabe government is also accused of neglecting the poor black subsistence farmers that it claims to have helped.

On Thursday, only weeks before the seasonal rains are due, Zimbabwean officials admitted there were not adequate supplies of seed and fertiliser for the growing season.

Privately, UN officials say they are frustrated by Harare's refusal to agree an emergency appeal to help the hundreds of thousands of people made homeless by the Mugabe government's housing demolitions.