

Aid groups warn COVID lockdown fueling famine

Dire predictions of a worldwide famine due to COVID-19 are already coming true, according to organizations in Africa and Asia that work with Canadian Church partners.

With farmers forced into isolation, people are facing hunger in the Philippines, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, said Shalmali Gutal, who runs a non-governmental organization in Asia that works with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace.

“In India, there are crops in the fields but farmers are not able to get to it, said Gutal, executive director of Focus on the Global South. “Peasants weren’t able to get to it because of the (COVID-19) lockdown. There were crops to be harvested, but a lot of it rotted.”

The World Food Program (WFP) has warned the United Nations Security Council the planet faces a famine of “biblical proportions” and it’s all because of the COVID-19 crisis.

“Famine is a very real and dangerous possibility,” WFP executive director David Beasley told the UN on April 21. “If we don’t prepare and act now – to secure access, avoid funding shortfalls and disruptions to trade – we could be facing multiple famines of biblical proportions within a short few months.”

The UN agency predicts that up to 265 million people face “acute food insecurity” as COVID-19 ramps up in poor countries south of the equator. That’s in addition to the 821 million people who already go to bed hungry every night.

Lockdowns across Asia weren’t supposed to prevent food from being harvested or transported, but local enforcement efforts have been inconsistent, arbitrary and often misguided, Gutal said. He fears Asia’s fragile food systems are breaking down.

Jesuit economist Rev. Charlie Chilufya, based in Nairobi, says the food system in sub-Saharan Africa is collapsing. He tells of a neighbour who imports farm produce from Tanzania.

“She told me no more produce was coming and that meant she herself does not have any more merchandise to buy and sell and this means no food and drink on her table,” Chilufya said in an e-mail. “And she told me she is no longer able to pay even for her accommodation.”

Chilufya, an economist at the International Monetary Fund before he joined the Jesuits, runs the Justice and Ecology Office of the Jesuit Conference of Africa

and Madagascar, an organization supported by Canadian Jesuits International.

On a continent where 41 per cent of the population lives on less than \$2.65 (Cdn) a day, even small interruptions in transportation, storage and harvesting of food will have dire effects.

“In the wake of COVID-19 something must be done, or else people in Africa will fall back into poverty and many people in Africa will fall into destitution,” he said.

A COVID-19 recession is “inevitable” in Africa, he said.

“Governments need to support people to be able to meet their basic needs while they shelter in place and wait for the economy to get back on its feet when this is over,” he said.

The fragility of food systems across Asia is compounded by government subsidies that go to huge food processors, packagers and distributors but somehow bypass the small farmers and peasants who actually produce the most food, said Gutal.

“COVID-19 came along and it has shown so visibly what even one week of not going to the fields does, what even one week of severe lockdown does across the region,” she said. “And this has been going on now six weeks.”

Focus on the Global South has been using funding from Development and Peace to organize peasants and pressure governments to redirect funds into supporting infrastructure – from roads to granaries to local markets – that would stabilize farm families.

“What is wrong with the food system is actually the lack of recognition by governments as to who is actually feeding the world,” Gutal said.