

Food Security Cluster - Tajikistan
Situation Report
February 5, 2008

Extreme winter temperatures, depleting food and fuel stocks, increasing prices, prolonged blackouts at the local and national levels and limited access to water has pushed almost the entire population of Tajikistan into a situation of humanitarian concern. While the current energy crisis, and an expected nationwide electricity blackout beginning in mid-February 2008, predominantly affects urban populations, a series of economic and environmental shocks over the last two years, compounded by the current energy crisis, have left rural populations with few remaining coping strategies for mitigating their increased level of food insecurity. Government of Tajikistan has reached out to the international community for assistance in the form of an appeal for fuel and food, but it is unlikely that a state of emergency will be declared nationally. The Food Security Cluster in Tajikistan considers the situation to be a food security emergency.

Tajikistan has experienced a variety of economic and social shocks over the last two years that have contributed to a situation of humanitarian concern at the national level. In 2006, hail storms and drought resulted in poor agricultural harvests, particularly in rural mountainous areas with limited or no access to irrigation systems. In 2007, the food security situation of rural populations has markedly deteriorated due to rising fuel costs, which have in turn, lead to higher transportation and food costs across the country. Continued drought in the spring and summer of 2007, as well as a locust invasion, further stretched the capacities of rural households to successfully cope with their increasing food insecurity and resulted in higher labor migration rates, particularly to Russia. This resulted in an increase in permanent women-headed households, which are traditionally more vulnerable to even minimal socio-economic shocks. The closure of the border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for more than one month due to the Uzbek elections late in the year resulted in food shortages and increased food costs as well.

Further aggravating the difficult living conditions, Tajikistan is experiencing an atypical winter since late December with heavy snowfall across the country and temperatures averaging -8 degrees Celsius during the day and -15 degrees Celsius at night. Temperatures in rural areas have reached a low as -25 degrees Celsius. These extreme temperatures were consistent throughout January, with only a few days respite with temperatures slightly below 0 degrees Celsius. These subzero temperatures are expected to continue through February. Livestock morbidity and mortality have increased, compromising another income and food option for the rural population. Many urban workers are losing income as business shut due to lack of electricity

The current energy crisis brought on by the extreme winter temperatures and low water levels supplying Tajikistan's main hydropower station, among other important factors, is threatening to plunge the entire nation into prolonged darkness sometime in mid-February. While the scale of the humanitarian impact is unclear at this point, it is generally agreed that the blackouts are having, and will continue to have their greatest negative impact in the urban centers. In a recent survey (end of January 2008) conducted by REACT, a national level emergency preparedness and response forum chaired by the Government of Tajikistan's Committee for Emergency Situations, approximately 40% of surveyed capital city residents and 94% surveyed of residents of cities outside of the capital reported inadequate access to water due to blackouts since early January. It has also been reported that approximately 30% of surveyed capital city residents and 75% of those in cities outside of the capital have experienced difficulties with purchasing food as a result of high food prices, food shortages, and limited access to markets due to heavy snowfall and/or icy conditions.

Rural households surveyed by Food Cluster members revealed that food and fuel supplies are almost completely exhausted and that several family members have either fallen ill or have died over the last few months due to the cold and inability to access proper medical care. The high food prices combined with the poor agricultural harvests last year have driven many households to sell their remaining productive assets and livestock in order to purchase food and medicines. Hardship migration has increased since December resulting in the abandonment of family homesteads and separation of family members. The decrease or complete disruption of electrical, gas and water services to both urban and rural areas has impacted both health and education services across the country, with many hospitals, health centers, and school districts closing their doors due to the dangerously cold and unhealthy conditions.

The Food Cluster has identified a variety of critical food and non-food items that if distributed in a timely manner to the neediest of households and institutions, may serve to counterbalance the immediate, and life threatening impacts of the abovementioned factors and conditions. These items include wheat flour and vegetable oil (in particular), warm clothes for children and the elderly, blankets and sleeping mats, jerry cans for carrying and storing water, flashlights, batteries, candles, matches, fuel (such as coal), generators, generator fuel, and medicines. Other responses are expected to include direct cash disbursements for household purchases of needed food and non-food items from local markets and Cash for Work.