

Where Every Meal Is a Sacrifice

Mauritania, and much of Africa, relies on imported food. As trade breaks down, destitute people face tough choices.

By Anthony Faiola - Washington Post Staff Writer - Monday, April 28, 2008; A01

NOUAKCHOTT, Mauritania - Even before he took a butcher knife to the she-goat's throat, Likbir Ould Mohamed Mahmoud knew it would only make things worse.

The goat was a living bounty in this parched city on the Sahara's edge, providing the sweet milk that filled his family's stomachs at breakfast time. But as soaring food prices worldwide have hit the poorest nations of Africa the hardest, he has been forced to join many of his neighbors in slaughtering or selling off one of their only sources of wealth -- their livestock.

By sacrificing the she-goat last month, the 39-year-old day laborer and goatherd traded the family's morning milk for dinner meat. It lasted a few days. With the family unable to afford skyrocketing prices for basic foods, he said, his two young children now cry in the morning from hunger. One recent morning, he could take it no more. He took the goat's kid -- one of the last two animals in his flock -- to the squalid livestock market here in the hopes of selling it to buy food. "Everything -- the wheat, rice, sugar and animal feeds -- is higher priced than I have ever seen them before," he said. "What will we do? Soon we will have nothing left to sell."

Like most of the world's poorest nations, Mauritania is caught in a global food trap, producing only 30 percent of what its people eat and importing most of the rest. As prices skyrocket, those who can least afford it are squeezed the most as the world confronts the worst bout of food inflation since the Soviet grain crisis of the 1970s.

Strong global demand and limited supplies are key factors driving up prices, but perhaps just as important is a massive disruption in the free flow of global trade. In recent months, food-producing countries from Argentina to Kazakhstan have begun to slam shut their doors to protect domestic access to the food they grow.

Agriculturally challenged countries are left out in the cold. Mahmoud, whose family dwells just beyond the dunes in a desert shantytown here, earns roughly \$1.50 a day to support his family of four. His wages have not risen. But over the past six months, the cost of the imported wheat his wife uses to make a chewy local bread has soared 67 percent, cooking oil is up 117 percent and rice 25 percent. Though those are the staples of life here, Mauritania, with only 0.2 percent of its land arable, produces scant amounts.

That is partly because there are fewer and fewer farmers. In a nation girdled by the encroaching Sahara, the slums of Nouakchott, the capital, are swelled with former tillers of soil who abandoned hard lives growing subsistence crops amid years of drought. City life was comparatively better, but in recent months as food prices have risen, those already living on the smallest of margins have despaired.

"I don't know how I will feed my family," Mahmoud said. "We just can't afford it."

Crisis Torments Africa

The [U.N. World Food Program](#) has flagged 30 nations confronting mounting food insecurity this year as a direct result of market forces; 22 of them are in Africa. As prices climb, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Senegal and other net food importers have been racked by civil unrest. Hunger is spiking in parts of the continent in patterns similar to past bouts of drought, floods or civil strife. In Mauritania -- a nation of 3 million straddling Arab and black Africa -- the number of people not getting enough food is up this year by 30 percent in rural areas despite a relatively good annual harvest, according to the WFP. A food emergency has been declared in broad sections of the country, with the food program rushing to roll out feeding stations.

[U.N.](#) experts, [World Bank](#) officials and aid groups fear it marks the onset of the worst food crisis in the region in decades; officials are calling for \$755 million in fresh emergency food assistance from rich countries. Aid groups are already falling behind in their efforts to provide food across the continent, leaving even the poorest communities increasingly dependent on the market.

"This is the new face of hunger," said [Josette Sheeran](#), WFP executive director.

Globalization was supposed to eliminate this kind of recurring disaster. With economists radiating confidence about the new efficiencies of the global market, the need for food self-sufficiency seemed almost archaic. In that new reality, global markets would provide the long-term cornucopia that the arid earth here could not, and at reasonable prices.

But it turned out that globalization did not really work for food. Countries, especially rich ones, felt compelled to continue protecting their farmers and their domestic food supply even as they pushed for trade liberalization for manufactured goods. It distorted the market, which didn't adjust as global demand surged and production flagged.

Not foreseeing that scenario, Mauritania's government abandoned long-standing policies of fixed food prices in the 1990s. But it also gave up on large-scale efforts to boost agricultural production, shifting resources to iron ore mining and other industries.

The last big agricultural push here -- an internationally backed effort to grow irrigated crops in the country's south -- failed more than 15 years ago, officials say, because money went to businessmen rather than farmers. They lacked the motivation and know-how required for large-scale cultivation. "The fields have been abandoned since then and are sitting there with weeds in disrepair," said Ahmeda Quld Mohamed Ahmed with the [U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization](#) office in Mauritania. "It wasn't really a national priority."

It has become one now, with the new, democratically elected government that came to power last year seeking to avoid a repeat of November food riots that led to one death and the burning and looting of storefronts. The government is pressing a major new irrigation program in the south with the ambitious goal of doubling agricultural production by year's end. "This is the government's number one priority," said Prime Minister Zeine Ould Zeidane.

Mauritania knows it must bear more of its own food burden. All around, food-producing countries are barring the doors to foreign trade. Argentina raised soybean and sunflower export taxes to as much as 44 percent. [Russia](#) has quadrupled wheat-export taxes to 40 percent. Kazakhstan, one of the world's biggest wheat exporters, halted foreign sales altogether. Rice prices shot to a record high after Indonesia stopped its farmers from selling the grain abroad.

At the same time, import-dependent countries that can afford the higher prices are hoarding. Wealthy Singapore is stockpiling rice. Malaysia is creating a new government agency to stockpile foodstuffs. Many countries, including Mauritania, have dropped long-standing import taxes to facilitate trade and lower prices at home. But with global supplies running short, the measures have had limited effect in controlling prices here. Importers in Mauritania, for instance, say they have roughly a 45-day supply of key commodities such as wheat.

"Everyone is out there protecting their own right now," said Joachim von Braun, director general of the District-based International Food Policy Research Institute. "And that isn't the way globalization is meant to work."

Rich Nations Grab Fish

The global competition for food is hitting Mauritania in other ways as well. That can be plainly seen on the Atlantic shores of Nouakchott, where another increasingly scarce food commodity is hauled onto sandy beaches daily in traditional wooden boats: fish.

The catch here has fallen sharply in recent years. Officials concede it is because Mauritania finds itself in a catch-22. Thirty percent of the national budget comes from selling industrial-scale fishing licenses, mostly to European ships, that now harvest the rich waters off Mauritania's coast. While that has given the

government a desperately needed source of hard currency, it has also meant less fish in local nets.

Even the best parts of the local haul end up in Europe or [Japan](#), as exporters greet fishermen on the sands just before sunset, bartering for the top-quality fish. The catch is rapidly packed in ice for shipping to London, Paris, New York and Tokyo as local fishmongers, out-priced, look on.

"We see our best-quality fish leaving the country right in front of our eyes every day," said Mame Kato Diop, 36, wrapped in flowing indigo and yellow robes as she and other fishmongers waited for the exporters to finish their deals. They would later buy what was left for resale in town. "They leave us with sardines as they eat juicy fish. We stand no chance against the hunger of richer countries."

Grouper, she said, used to be a staple of traditional cooking, but it has largely disappeared from local tables. Even the poor quality fish that remain have gone up in price, fishmongers here say, by about 40 percent over the past five years.

An Early Exodus of Men

In the distant, rural southeast where mud-hut villages dot the sands and the sun cooks the air to 118 degrees at noon, the World Food Program has declared a food emergency. In open-air markets here, the price of sorghum -- the major regional staple used to make starchy porridge spiced with tree sap -- has jumped more than 20 percent in six months, a sharp rise in a region where more than 60 percent of the people earn less than a \$1 a day. It has happened as neighboring Mali, blessed with slightly higher precipitation and crop yields and fearing its own budding food crisis, has halted grain exports to Mauritania. Wheat, being hoarded in cities, has all but disappeared from many local markets here. Merchants from Senegal and Mali have come over the border to buy up whatever wheat is left, because it is still less expensive here than in their home countries.

Though subsistence farmers in the area have long cultivated the arid earth for sorghum, it has never yielded enough for their families. To earn money to buy more, the men of these parts leave annually in search of temporary work to prepare for the late-spring lean season, before the rains come.

The annual migration is occurring months earlier this year as food prices soar. In Bouta, a destitute village of 70 families near the Mali border, all the able-bodied men left in search of work months ago, leaving behind a hamlet of women, old men and children.

Like most women in Bouta, Metouna Mint Mohmaud, 29, does not know where her husband is, only that he has gone with the other men in search of manual labor in towns many days' walk from here. There is no phone -- no electricity -- to keep in contact. But she does know, and WFP officials have confirmed, that her

11-month-old twin girls have grown severely malnourished in recent months. Food, she said, has been a struggle as long as she can remember, but her eyes quickened with anxiety as she talked about the village's recent problems.

Sorghum seeds, many of which come from Mali or are imported from other countries, have doubled in price in the four months since the men left. The village women fret about how to buy them, even with the sums their men may eventually bring back. "How will we eat this year?" she said, rocking one of her languid twins in her lap. "We cannot afford the seeds to plant."

Already, the \$3 a week she earns from weaving the golden lapels used in traditional bubu robes has dropped. "We can't sell them -- everyone is spending their money on the more expensive food," she said. "I don't have a plan; I don't know what to do."

Food prices are wreaking havoc even in those towns fortunate enough to receive food aid. In Maghleg, a village some 30 miles east of Bouta, the WFP food bank that sells grains below market price is half-empty. The system works by having local food managers use the proceeds from food-aid sales to restock coffers for the future. But as prices for most grains have doubled or more over the past six months, the money from current sales is not enough to replenish sold stocks. It has left more people dependent on the local market a full day's walk from town.

So far, however, it is the erosion of livelihoods that have experts most concerned here. They fear it may accelerate into a far broader crisis that could approximate the large-scale African famines of the 1980s.

"For many people, the sources of income are drying up just as food prices are increasing," said Gian Carlo Cirri, the WFP's Mauritania country director. "We are very, very worried about what may happen next."

'What's the Lowest You Can Go?'

One of the most disturbing warning signs that the situation is turning critical here is a sharp increase in the sale of livestock, especially by poor farmers and shantytown dwellers. The market has not yet adjusted: The surge in supplies is bringing down the price of livestock, though meat prices remain high. It has put people like Likbir Ould Mohamed Mahmoud in dire straits.

"Who will buy my goat?" he called in Nouakchott's trash-strewn Marobe Haywane livestock market, cradling the baying kid in his arms. He stepped over the ground -- a mix of desert sand and slaughtered goat parts -- addressing a crowd filled with far more sellers than buyers. "Please, won't you look at it?"

It is his last goat; his family of four has sold or eaten the five others in the past year as food prices have spiked. The family will be left with one lamb when this is gone, if the kid sells.

A prospective buyer in emerald-green robes shows interest. Mahmoud engages him.

"Let me sell you this goat."

"How much? What's the lowest you can go?"

"Gimme [\$25], at least."

"It is a very small goat."

"Yes, it is. I raised it in my house. But it is also very nice."

No sale. As has happened throughout the day, the buyer will not pay what had been the going rate here for months, not when so many other goats are for sale. Mahmoud considered what to do, resigning himself to asking for an advance from his part-time job as a goatherd for a businessman in the market. "I cannot sell it too cheaply," he said of the kid goat. "It would not be right for my family."

The family is already in debt at the local market, a debt that has grown to \$20 in recent months. He has no idea how he will pay it back. He prays, he said, that the market owner will keep lending to him. "How else will we eat? The prices are too high." Though life is hard here, he, like others in the shantytown, say going back to their lives of trying to coax food from the arid earth in the country would be worse. He is here to stay, he said.

"Of course I don't want to go back to the village," he said. "There, you can die of hunger without realizing it. You don't even see food. Here at least you can see it, even though you can't get it. It kind of gives you hope. You can see it in a car passing by. That makes me happy."