DAMASCUS, 9 September 2010 (IRIN) - A top UN official warns that Syria's drought is affecting food security and has pushed 2-3 million people into "extreme poverty".

During a mission to Syria which ended on 7 September, Olivier de Schutter, UN special rapporteur on the right to food, said 1.3 million people had been affected by the four-year drought, 800,000 of whom had had their livelihoods devastated.

"The situation is really bad," said Selly Muzammil, spokesperson for the World Food Programme (WFP) in Syria.

In June the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Syria said the drought had ended but that inconsistent rainfall was causing crop failures. Other UN agencies say the drought is ongoing.

Schutter said four consecutive droughts had affected Syria since 2006, with the drought in 2007-2008 being particularly devastating. "The losses from these repeated droughts have been significant for the population in the northeastern part of the country, particularly in Al-Hasakeh, Deir Ezzor and Al-Raqqa."

Small-scale farmers have been worst affected. Many farmers have not been able to cultivate enough food or earn enough money to feed their families. Herders have also lost 80-85 percent of their livestock since 2005, according to UN figures.

Thousands have left northeastern areas and live in informal settlements or camps close to Damascus. Experts warn, off the record, that the true figure of those living in "extreme poverty" could be higher than the 2-3 million estimate.

Wheat

The drought is also threatening food security. Whilst the government says it is self-sufficient in wheat - the primary strategic crop in Syria - production has not matched demand.

This year’s yield was 3.3 million tons, compared to demand for 3.8 million tons, according to government figures. Wheat has been imported.

"Syria has enough to stocks for the shortage at the moment. The problem is that poor families have had several years of bad crops so their resilience capacity is low. Many families now don't have access to credit, for example," said Mario Zappacosta, an economist from FAO's trade and markets division.

The biggest challenge Syria is facing is altered weather conditions such as inconsistent rainfall, according to officials at the Ministry of Agriculture. Adversely affecting farmers, it is not clear whether the changes are natural fluctuations in the climate or permanent changes due to global warming.

Water sources have also been permanently affected. Farmers used wells to draw on groundwater resources because of a lack of rainfall. The situation is exacerbated by the inefficient use of water, Schutter said the dropping of groundwater tables was a "serious concern".

The Syrian government and the UN have been handing out food to those affected and working to implement more efficient agricultural policies. Central planning is gradually being replaced by indicative planning with an agricultural support fund providing subsidies for certain strategic crops.

Earlier this month an irrigation project was launched in the lower Euphrates basin, near Deir Ezzor to reduce water drawn from groundwater reserves.

But Schutter warned that the Syrian drought appeal was not receiving enough money as aid had been politicized. Only 34 percent of the total funds requested had been received, according to the UN. One of the effects of this has been to limit WFP food parcels to 200,000 of the 300,000 people it had hoped to target during distribution in June.

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