Press Release

Food riots: “Predictable crisis, unprepared governments” - UN expert

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GENEVA – Following last week’s food riots in Mozambique and the resulting deaths and injuries, and noting similar social unrest in other countries, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, called on governments and the international community to respond promptly to the renewed instability of global food markets.

“The crowds’ anger in Mozambique and other countries was predictable,” warned Mr. De Schutter. “We know where the food system is failing. We know which measures should be taken. But lack of political will and a lost sense of urgency have unacceptably delayed decisive action.”

The Special Rapporteur urged the emergency meeting convened by FAO, to take place in Rome on 24 September 2010, to move beyond words and prepare measures on speculation and food reserves. Mr. De Schutter also called upon donors to significantly increase their support to poor food-deficit countries.

“Not acting now is unacceptable,” emphasized Mr. De Schutter. “In 2008, many governments were taken by surprise,” he said. “We have today a much better understanding of what needs to be done to realize the right to food. Experts have done their work. It is now time for governments to act.”

In his view, despite the many commitments made since 2008, too little has been achieved since: “Donors have not delivered on their promises. Governments have not reinvested enough in the production of food crops for local production. As a result, most poor countries are still highly vulnerable. They continue to rely for their export revenues on a limited range of commodities, and their food security is excessively dependent on food imports whose prices are increasingly high and volatile.”

Since the global food price crisis of 2008, the Special Rapporteur on the right to food has emphasized “the need for structural measures to address food price increases”. His proposals include (1) the regulation of speculation on international food markets, particularly by profit-driven commodity funds; (2) the creation of a global reinsurance mechanism for poorer countries to invest in social protection and subsidized food, and; (3) improved global governance of international and regional food reserves, including the creation of regional food stocks to allow governments to mitigate price shocks.

Speaking while on mission in Syria, also affected by severe drought, the UN independent expert noted that “food, and fuel, prices are increasing on the international market while poor countries pay for imports in hard currencies, whose values have risen.”

“Populations in poor net-food-importing countries are hardest hit because these governments have few possibilities to mitigate the shock,” Mr. De Schutter said. “Price increases are
exacerbated by speculation from unregulated traders, and they are transmitted directly to households, who often spend 60 to 70 per cent of their incomes on food.”

As a result of the grain export ban announced by Russia and of speculation on the world cereal markets, food prices on international markets have already increased by five percent since July 2010, bringing the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index up to its highest level since September 2008. Although the world cereal output in 2010 should still be the third highest on record, fears about future supplies have led the prices of wheat to increase 70 percent on international markets since last year.

Olivier De Schutter was appointed the Special Rapporteur on the right to food in May 2008 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. He is independent from any government or organization.

Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/food/index.htm and http://www.srfood.org.

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