

Food Crisis is 'a Silent Tsunami'

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Rising food prices are creating what the United Nations' World Food Program Executive Director Josette Sheeran calls "a silent tsunami" threatening to push "more than 100 million people" into hunger. Riots have been reported in Egypt, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire.

The US Department of Labor says that in the past 12 months, the price of white bread has gone up by 16.3 percent, milk by 13.3 percent and eggs by 34.8 percent.

Here in Savannah, local food banks are feeling the pinch. Mary Jane Crouch, executive director of the Second Harvest food bank, says she is seeing more working class families needing assistance. "One of every six people in a soup kitchen line is a child," says Crouch. She worries that the children in Chatham County who qualify for free or reduced-price meals at school will go hungry this summer.

According to the World Food Program, the rising food prices are due to "rising oil and energy costs, growing competition between biofuels and food, growing demand from burgeoning economies in the developing world and increased climate and weather-related events destroying crops and reducing food supplies."

Soaring oil and energy prices have increased the cost of production, transportation and packaging of food. To combat high oil prices, governments invested in biofuels—an alternative to polluting fossil fuels. Biofuel programs

convert corn, soybeans and sugar into ethanol and biodiesel fuels. In December 2007, President Bush signed legislation requiring wider use of ethanol, calling it “a major step” toward energy independence. But the UN’s new top advisor on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter, says, “The ambitious goals for biofuel production set by the United States and the European Union are irresponsible.” His predecessor in the UN post, Jean Ziegler, described them as a “crime against humanity” and called for an outright moratorium on biofuels. Merrill Lynch analysts, however, say that without biofuel programs the price of oil would increase by about \$13 per barrel. But steep oil and energy costs aren’t the only things driving food prices up.

In recent years, people in developing countries are starting to eat more meat and dairy products. That in turn drives up demand for grains, which are at record lows. Bob Lee, manager of Fidelity Select Consumer Staples, says planting more grain isn’t as easy as it sounds. “There’s only so much arable land in the world,” he says.

With the many contributing factors to high food prices, the UN says it’s tougher to meet global commitments in reducing hunger. “We see mounting hunger and increasing evidence of malnutrition, which has severely strained the capacities of humanitarian agencies to meet humanitarian needs,” says UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

While the UN reports that the majority of countries adversely affected are in Africa, Americans are struggling too. The Congressional Budget Office projects that a record 28 million Americans will require food stamps this year. These

benefits are adjusted every October based on the federal food inflation rate for the previous June. Because prices have swelled so dramatically since last June, many are turning to food banks and other charities. Mary Jane Crouch of Second Harvest food bank is hopeful that the May 10th 'Stamp Out Hunger' food drive will fill both shelves and bellies here in Savannah.