

Swaziland declares national disaster

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Swaziland's Prime Minister Themba Dlamini has declared that the country is in a state of national disaster due to the effects of drought, hailstorms and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Critics say the declaration comes late as about a quarter of the population already is in need of food aid.

Prime Minister Dlamini yesterday at a press conference in Mbabane announced that "the Kingdom of Swaziland is seriously facing a humanitarian crisis that stems from three adjoining fundamental trends, namely drought and land degradation, increasing poverty and HIV/AIDS."

- All of these have reinforcing negative effects that have created a web of extreme vulnerability reinforced by the collapse of family structures, added Mr Dlamini. The result was a state of national disaster, which means that more of state resources must be directed towards the humanitarian crisis and probably will result in increased foreign donor aid.

The Swazi Prime Minister said that the current crisis presented "a novel situation" because of "the deadly combination of HIV/AIDS and poverty." According to the UN, almost 40 percent of the Swazi population is now HIV infected. Therefore, the Kingdom was now facing "a desperate scenario, which requires urgent national and international intervention."

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), Swaziland however has been facing a humanitarian crisis for a longer time. The Kingdom, according to WFP, "has experienced three years of erratic rainfall, which have dramatically reduced agricultural output ... and exhausted many people's coping mechanisms."

The UN food agency is already feeding more than 200,000 Swazis as part of its large emergency operation in Southern Africa. Given the worldwide negative publicity surrounding luxury spending by King Mswati III, it has however been difficult to raise funds for WFP operations in Swaziland.

The declaration of disaster in Swaziland was long awaited and the semi-independent daily 'Times of Swaziland' talks of "a delay running into several months." Swazi civil society groups had urged the government to make this declaration for months.

Prime Minister Dlamini told the 'Times of Swaziland' that the declaration would mean serious changes in government spending, but that "not all national projects will come to a halt." Asked on the large investments in Swaziland's new and controversial international airport, Mr Dlamini however said he would not comment on single projects.

The Swazi government hopes that the state of emergency coupled with changes in public spending would now attract foreign donors. Prime Minister Dlamini at the Mbabane press conference sent an "appeal to the international community, our friends and the citizens to assist and make whatever available resources in order to respond effectively to the challenges the country is facing."

WFP representatives commented they had expected the announcement as Swaziland grew more desperate to generate new funds from donors. "The situation has definitely worsened since October last year, when people were still hopeful about the rain. What happened is in December and January is that it had become clear that the rains were not sufficient," the WFP's Sarah Laughton told AFP news agency.

Fresh funds for the many drought and HIV/AIDS victims in Swaziland however will depend upon whether the government follows up the declaration with changes in public spending. In particular, it will be noted whether Mswati III, Africa's last absolute King, will back down on his plans to build new palaces for his wives and other luxury spending.

As the Swazi government, hit by low international credibility, struggles to achieve new funds, potential donors have sufficient humanitarian projects they could finance in the region. Millions are affected by the regional drought in Southern Africa. Only in nearby Lesotho, which declared a state of disaster one week ago, WFP estimates that some 800,000 persons need food aid.

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