

'Aids at the root of the food crisis in Lesotho'

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For a third consecutive year, hundreds of thousands of people in Lesotho are going to need international help to survive due to the combined effects of drought and Aids, a United Nations envoy said on Thursday.

"Any hopes that Lesotho's humanitarian crisis would begin to ease this year have been dashed," said James Morris, the UN special envoy for humanitarian needs in Southern Africa.

Morris is travelling to the tiny mountain kingdom on Friday with Unicef executive director Carol Bellamy and UNAids chief Peter Piot to meet with government officials and visit some of the worst-affected areas.

The high-powered delegation will also attend the launch on Saturday of a government programme aimed at persuading all one million adults in Lesotho to test for HIV within a year.

Lesotho's government declared a state of emergency last month when it became clear that the country was facing another year of severe food shortages.

Early estimates indicate the country might only produce 10% of its cereal requirements in 2004, leaving tens of thousands of families dependent on food assistance, the United Nations said in a statement on Thursday.

The World Food Programme has delivered over 50 000 tons of food aid to over 370 000 people since the launch of emergency operations in mid-2002.

But other aid projects, including ones providing better access to water, sanitation, education and health care, will also be essential, according to a statement issued in Johannesburg.

An estimated 31% of adults in Lesotho are infected with HIV, the fourth highest rate in the world.

About 70 people die every day from Aids-related causes, and 73 000 children have been orphaned.

"Drought has slashed Lesotho's harvests over the past three years, but HIV/Aids is at the root of the food crisis, as well as of other crises in health and education," Piot said in the statement.

"Lesotho's future depends on how successfully it tackles the epidemic, and that depends on the help of the international community."

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