Drought: State of disaster declared . . . US$2bn needed for food relief

Wed, 03 Apr 2024 22:30:25

Zvamaida Murwira-Senior Reporter

President Mnangagwa has declared the El Nino drought that has hit Zimbabwe in the 2023/2024 summer cropping season a national state of disaster with effect from yesterday, stating that Zimbabwe needs at least US$2 billion to mitigate the effects of the drought, with significantly more people now requiring food aid.

Making the declaration at State House yesterday, the President said this would allow comprehensive efforts to mobilise the needed resources and reassured the nation that the Government would ensure that no person and no place would be left without sustenance.

Zambia and Malawi, also hit by the El Niño drought, have already declared similar states of disaster.

Under a state of disaster the Government is able to reallocate resources and take other emergency measures to cope.

President Mnangagwa said Government would intervene to mitigate the effects of drought and at the same time he sought assistance internationally and locally to help meet the needed measures.

“Preliminary assessments show that Zimbabwe requires in excess of US$2 billion towards various interventions we envisage in the spectrum of our national response. Once again, let me assure you my fellow Zimbabweans, that our national response will be broad, comprehensive and all encompassing. No one and no place will be left without sustenance,” said President Mnangagwa.

“The foregoing situation of the climate change-induced drought requires measures and interventions as provided for in our laws. To that end, I do hereby declare a nationwide state of disaster, due to the El Niño-induced drought.

“Accordingly, I now invoke Section 27, Subsection 1 of the Civil Protection Act, which provides that if at any time it appears to the President that any disaster of such a nature and extent that extraordinary measures are necessary to assist and protect the persons affected or likely to be affected by the disaster in any area of the country, the President may, in such a manner as he considers fit, declare that, with effect from a date specified by him, a state of disaster exists within an area or areas specified by him in the declaration,” said President Mnangagwa.

“By this declaration, I also call upon all Zimbabweans of goodwill, including those in the diaspora, the international community, United Nations agencies, development and humanitarian partners, international financial institutions, the private sector, churches and other faith-based organisations, as well as individuals to generously donate towards ameliorating this state of national disaster.”

Zimbabwe had planted the optimum hectarage of maize and other grains that would have guaranteed good harvests had it not been for the severe drought

More than 80 percent of the country received below normal rainfall. A total 1 728 897 hectares had been put under maize and other cereals.

“Ordinarily this would have guaranteed a bountiful harvest.

“Further worsening the situation characterised by poor rainfall was the outbreak of fall armyworm across the country,” he said.

Last year’s report of the Zimbabwe Livelihoods Assessment Committee found that about 2,7 million people then were expected to be food insecure from April last year until the end of last month, and these are the people who had already been receiving food aid from stocks accumulated from surpluses of past seasons.

More people would now need assistance, hence the emergency measures required.

Normally Zimbabwe could feed itself with surpluses built up in food stocks owing to multi-pronged agricultural and food systems strategies .

The strategic grain reserve, that is grain not needed for ordinary commercial use, currently held 145 604 tonnes of maize, and 43 964 tonnes of traditional grain, with 138 905 tonnes of surplus wheat set to be allocated for the strategic grain reserve to give a combined 356 000 tonnes of cereals.

With 868 273 tonnes expected from this season’s harvests the country faced food cereal deficit of nearly 680 000 tonnes of grain. This deficit would have to be bridged by imports, with the private sector expected to import its share of the needs, said President Mnangagwa.

“Top on our priority is securing food for all Zimbabweans. No Zimbabwean must succumb to or die from hunger. Adequate resources will therefore, be mobilised and redirected towards national food security, including through supplementary grain imports,” he said.

“All available grain in the country will be secured through competitive prices and prompt payment towards encouraging farmers to release and sell available grain, including to the Grain Marketing Board. A robust and responsive mechanism has been put in place to guarantee that food reaches needy communities timely.”

The winter wheat crop programme for 2024 now assumed greater importance and urgency as there was need to expand the hectarage.

Therefore, winter wheat maize projects in areas such as Chiredzi, Muzarabani and Binga needed to be reactivated towards drought mitigation. Furthermore, the agriculture mechanisation and modernisation programme would continue until the majority of small-holder farmers upgrade their operations, in line with the ongoing rural development agenda.

Government would continue rolling out measures to ensure drinking water was adequate for both people and livestock, and more boreholes would be drilled under the Presidential Borehole Drilling Programme to ensure adequate and safe water.

Responding to questions, President Mnangagwa said while current infrastructure projects were going on unpeturbed, there was a likelihood of diverting some of the funds to procure food should that need arise.

“The projects have not been affected. They are still ongoing, but there is a possibility that as we move on, and as the impact of drought weighs on us, we may consider diverting some of the resources to mitigate the impact of drought,” he said.

President Mnangagwa said Government would not export any food for now and was infact looking forward to importing from South Africa which has some surpluses.

“In South Africa they usually have huge surplus but they have a small surplus this season. We will hear from them. We believe they might sell us that small surplus,” he said.

Zimbabwe, he said, had a lot to learn from other countries such as Russia with vast experience in irrigation farming.