

GLOBAL INFORMATION AND EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON FOOD AND AGRICULTURE (GIEWS)

SPECIAL ALERT

No. 333

COUNTRY: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone

DATE: 2 September 2014

Grave food security concerns following the Ebola outbreak in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea

Highlights

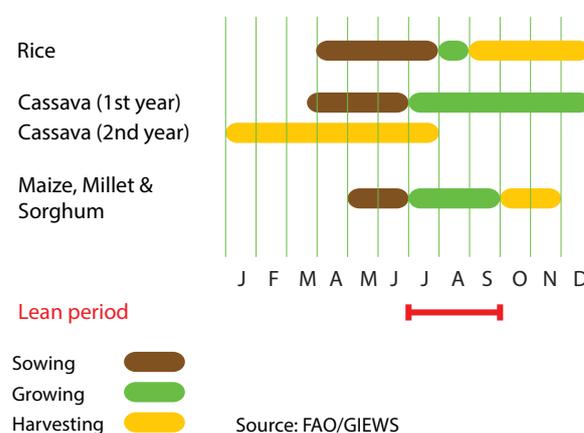
- The 2014 main crop harvesting season is about to start and faces difficulties mainly due to labour shortages as a result of movement restrictions following the Ebola outbreak.
- Disruptions in cross-border trade and marketing activities have resulted in sharp price rises, affecting the food security situation of large numbers of people.
- An Emergency Operation (EMOP) amounting to 65 000 tonnes was jointly approved by WFP and FAO on 25 August 2014 to provide food assistance to approximately 1.3 million most affected people over a period of three months.
- FAO, together with respective government authorities and other stakeholders, is supporting the overall response plan and identifying appropriate mechanisms to assist agricultural production, specifically in harvesting and related post-harvest activities.

The Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak has severely affected Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, resulting in deaths and adversely impacting on the agricultural sector and food security conditions. According to the latest World Health Organization (WHO) report (29 August 2014), a total of 3 052 cases have been recorded in West Africa, causing 1 546 deaths (the latest WHO updates are available at the following URL link: www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola). In response, WHO announced an International Public Health Emergency and the governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone declared emergencies, implementing preventative and eradication measures to combat the EVD outbreak. These include the establishment of quarantine zones and imposition of restrictions on the movement of people.

Although necessary, these restrictions have resulted in food security concerns that curtailed the movement of goods and services, including food items, leading to panic buying, food shortages and significant price hikes. In addition, the ban on bush meat is expected to deprive some households of an important source of nutrition and income.

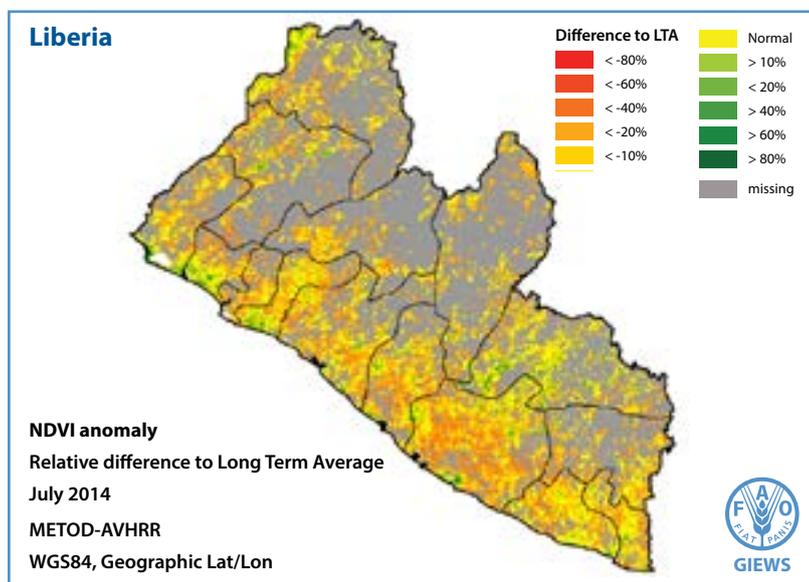
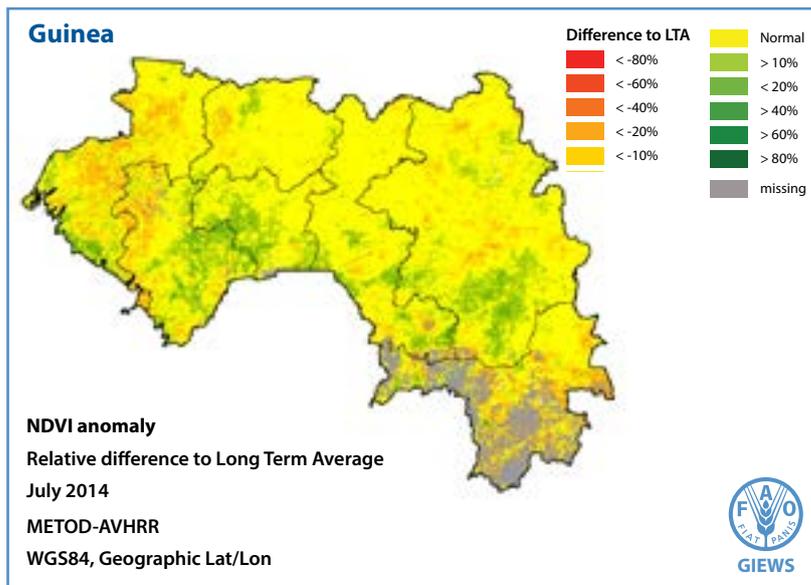
Furthermore, with the peak of the crop harvesting, mainly cereals, due in a few weeks' time, the likely labour shortages on farms would have severe implications for food and cash crop production in the affected areas, thus jeopardizing the food security of large numbers of people.

Crop calendar (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone)



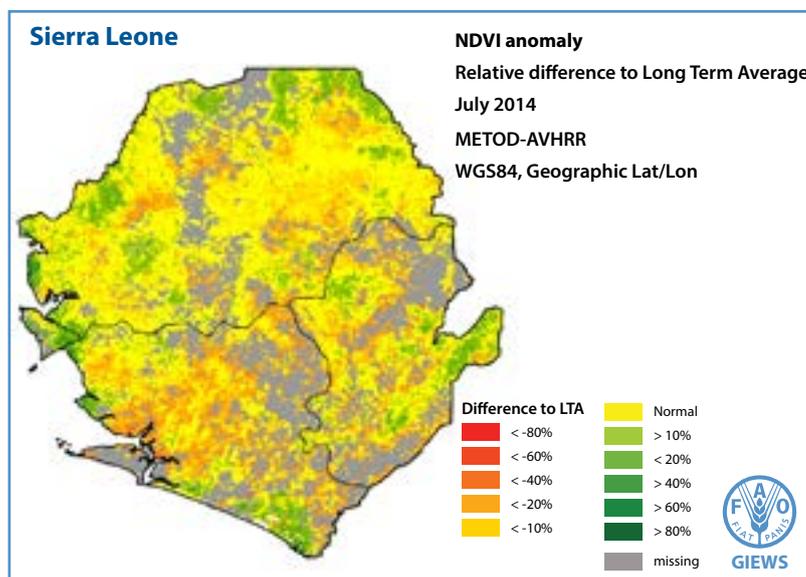
Upcoming crop harvest faces difficulties due mainly to labour shortages

Harvesting of the main season cereal crops begins in earnest in September across many parts of West Africa. Adequate rainfall during the 2014 cropping season (April-December) in most areas of the main Ebola affected countries had previously led to positive crop production outlooks at the start of the season, with preliminary forecasts indicating average to above-average output levels. Satellite based analysis also indicated near-normal vegetation conditions in most cropping areas, except in parts of Guinea and Liberia.



The areas with high incidences of EVD are among the most productive regions of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Therefore, the outbreak of EVD together with the restrictions on the movement of people and the supply of labour has led to serious concerns on production prospects. In addition, cash crop production (including palm oil, cocoa and rubber) is expected to be seriously affected, with recent reports indicating labour shortages.

Such a decline in both food and cash crop production would severely impact household incomes, thus reducing purchasing power and inhibiting food access.

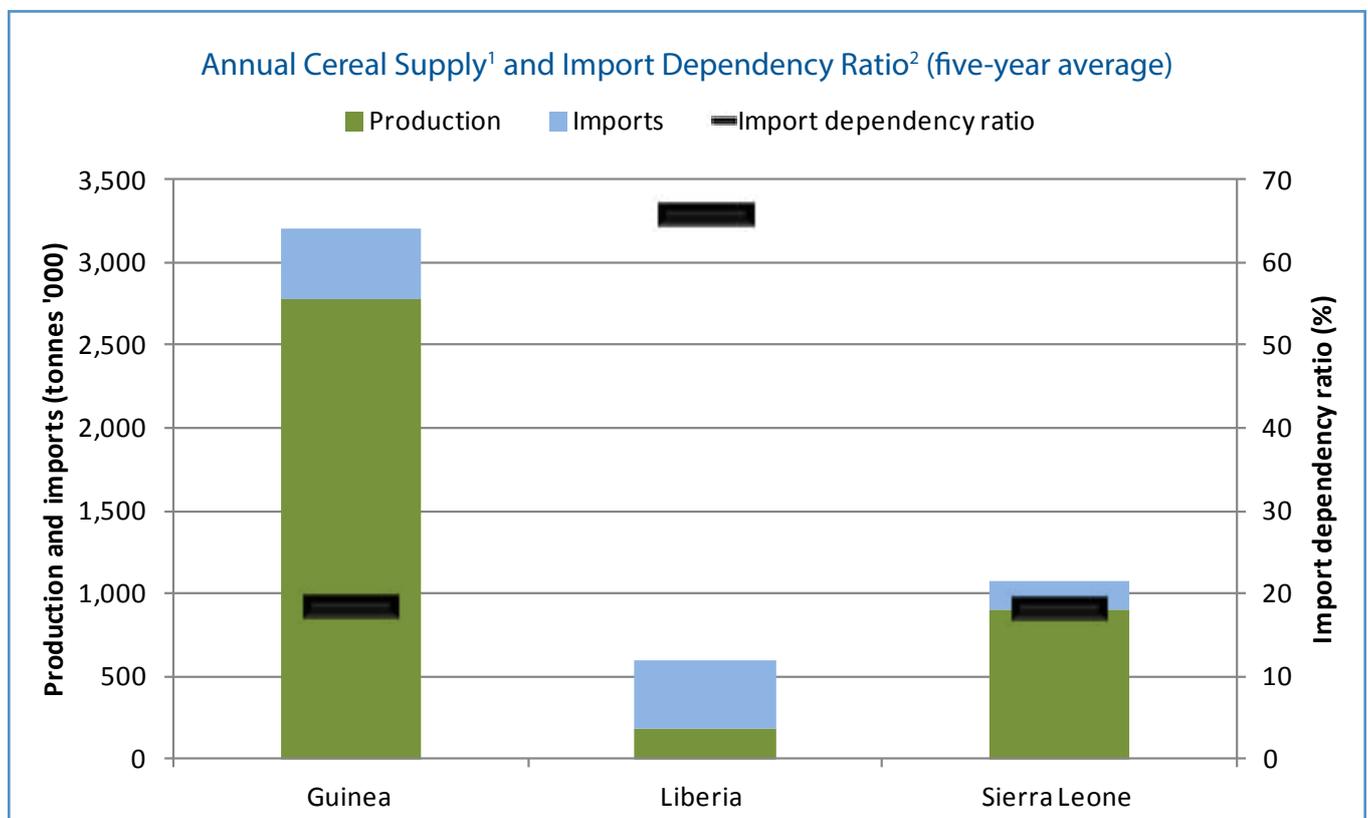


Market disruptions exacerbate seasonal price increases

Seasonal food price increases during the lean season, between July and September, were exacerbated by the Ebola outbreak, which restricted trade flows and caused market disruptions. Recent reports indicate reduced trade of agricultural produce, both internally and across borders, while market closures have also contributed to reducing food access. Given that a large proportion of household incomes is spent on food (up to nearly 80 percent in some locations), the sharp price increases would have a severe impact on food security conditions. Households in urban areas are expected to be more affected by the market closures, given their greater reliance on market supplies. Concurrently, diminished farm purchases by traders are also expected to negatively impact rural households' incomes, further aggravating the already fragile food security conditions.

All three countries are net cereal importers, with Liberia the most reliant on external supplies to satisfy domestic consumption requirements. The closure of some border crossings and the isolation of border areas where the three countries intersect, are expected to result in tighter supplies. Reports have also indicated reduced trade from sea-ports, the main conduit for large-scale commercial imports. Additionally, the depreciation of national currencies (in Sierra Leone and Liberia) in recent months is expected to exert further upward pressure on prices of imported food commodities. Moreover, the scaling down of mining operations, a significant foreign exchange earner, as well as an expected reduction in the cash crop output, could place further negative pressure on the exchange rate. Fortunately, the generally stable and lower year-on-year international rice prices, a main food staple, have so far contributed to lessening import inflationary pressure. Generally, the travel and trade restrictions are negatively impacting on the overall economic activity that is likely to deepen the negative impact of the Ebola outbreak.

Measures to revive internal trade are essential to ease supply constraints and mitigate further price increases. In the meantime, emergency food aid is required to bridge immediate supply gaps of vulnerable populations, particularly in the area where the three countries intersect, which have recorded the highest number of cases.

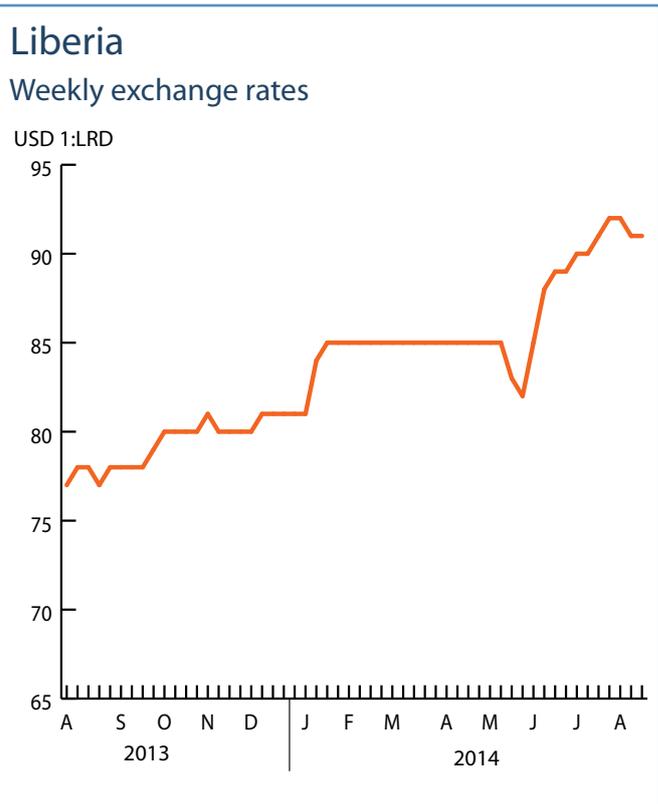


¹Domestic production and import, excluding stocks.

²Import Dependency Ratio (IDR) is defined as: $IDR = \frac{\text{imports} * 100}{(\text{production} + \text{imports} - \text{exports})}$. The complement of this ratio to 100 would represent that part of the domestic food supply that has been produced in the country itself.

In **Liberia**, quarantine and contamination measures in several parts of the country, including Barkedu (Lofa County – a main food producing area), West Point (Monrovia) and Dolo Town (Margibi County), have led to a sharp decline in market food supplies. Reports also indicate that the distribution of imported food from Monrovia’s sea-port to rural markets has been reduced; this is a key source of rice supplies for rural areas. These abnormal supply shortages have contributed to driving food prices higher. A recently conducted rapid market assessment indicates that prices of some food items have increased rapidly (for instance, cassava increased by up to 150 percent within the first two weeks of August in Monrovia). In addition, increasing transportation costs have added further upward price pressure.

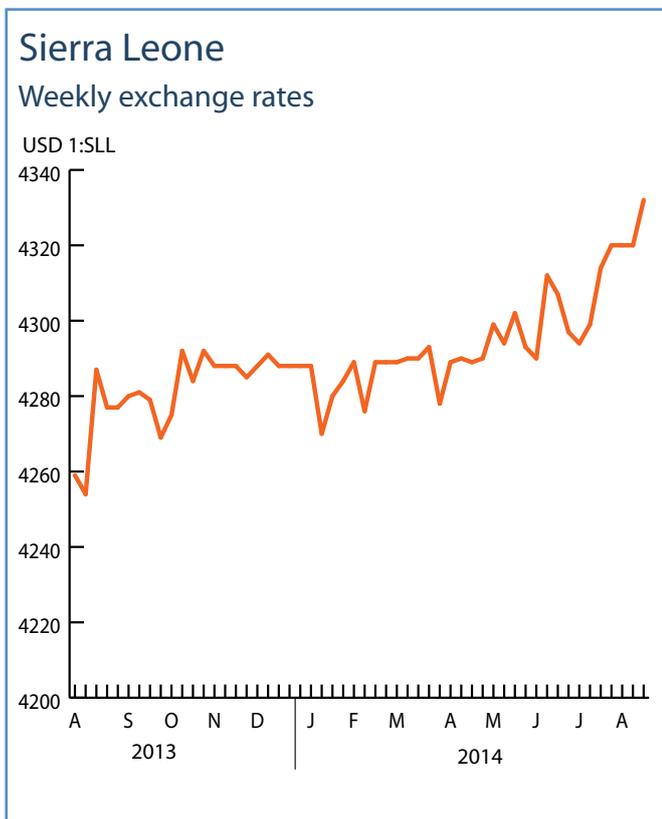
The country retains a high dependency on cereal imports, with an average import dependency ratio of 66 percent. Given the heavy reliance on external cereal supplies, and the depreciation of the Liberian dollar, upward pressure is expected to be exerted on domestic food prices. However, lower year-on-year quotations of parboiled rice (the most consumed rice) and continued suspension of import tariffs, have helped to partly mitigate import inflationary pressure. As of August, according to the Government of Liberia,



national rice stocks were estimated at about 36 000 tonnes, sufficient to cover just over one month’s food requirements.

In **Sierra Leone**, the closure of markets, internal travel restrictions and fear of infection has curtailed food trade and caused supply shortages. Although price data is not available, reports have indicated food price spikes. Although the country’s dependency on imported rice has been decreasing, it still remains a net-importer, with a cereal import dependency ratio of about 18 percent. The depreciation of the currency, which has quickened since June, is expected to add inflationary pressure.

In **Guinea**, reports indicate a reduction in agricultural produce entering some markets, especially in areas near the borders of Liberia and Sierra Leone. This has resulted in upward pressure on food prices. However, import inflationary pressure is estimated to be less significant compared to Liberia and Sierra Leone, given the stable exchange rate and the relative low import dependency ratio (16 percent). However, Guinea exports small volumes of rice, maize and millet, and the border closure is expected to negatively impact on export opportunities and therefore farmers’ incomes, while concurrently reducing available supplies for Liberia and Sierra Leone.



Emergency response needs and efforts

Set against the back-drop of already high levels of poverty and limited social service capacities, the impact of the EVD outbreak is having acute repercussions on the food security of affected populations. Reduced food trade, consequent rising prices and expected reductions in domestic harvests are likely to further undermine the fragile state of food security. In response, WFP has launched a regional Emergency Operation (EMOP) amounting to 65 000 tonnes of food, targeting 1.3 million persons. The EMOP targets people in areas that have become isolated, including: a) confirmed/suspected cases in hospitals receiving medical care; b) confirmed/suspected contact cases in quarantine/observation; and c) communities in “hot zones” where availability and access to food is anticipated to have deteriorated.

FAO, together with government agencies and other stakeholders, is assisting in outreach communication through FAO’s local networks (including animal health clubs, community animal health workers, producer organizations, forestry contacts and agriculture extension) to inform communities of the risks and measures that should be taken to prevent further infection, while FAO epidemiologists are assisting relevant institutions in Guinea and Sierra Leone. In addition, rapid needs assessments are also required to specify the measures that will be needed to assist agricultural production operations, including in:

- Harvesting and related post-harvest activities.
- Storage and transport of produce.
- Sales of produce through, for instance, institutions’ purchases, including for food assistance.

Disclaimer

This Special Alert has been prepared under the responsibility of FAO’s Global Information and Early Warning System, with information from official and unofficial sources. None of the information in this Alert should be regarded as statements of governmental views. Furthermore, the designations employed and the presentation of material in this information product do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the FAO concerning the legal or development status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Since conditions may change rapidly, please contact the undersigned for further information if required.

Shukri Ahmed
Senior Economist, EST-GIEWS
Trade and Markets Division, FAO
Fax: 0039-06-5705-4495
E-mail: giews1@fao.org

Please note that this Special Alert is also available on the Internet as part of the FAO World Wide Web www.fao.org at the following URL address: www.fao.org/giews.

The Special Alerts/Reports can also be received automatically by e-mail as soon as they are published, by subscribing to the GIEWS/Alerts report ListServ. To do so, please send an e-mail to the FAO-Mail-Server at the following address: listserv@listserv.fao.org, leaving the subject blank, with the following message:

subscribe GIEWSAlertsWorld-L

To be deleted from the list, send the message:

unsubscribe GIEWSAlertsWorld-L

Please note that it is now possible to subscribe to regional lists to only receive Special Reports/Alerts by region: Africa, Asia, Europe or Latin America (GIEWSAlertsAfrica-L, GIEWSAlertsAsia-L, GIEWSAlertsEurope-L and GIEWSAlertsLA-L). These lists can be subscribed to in the same way as the worldwide list.

© FAO 2014

FAO encourages the use, reproduction and dissemination of material in this information product. Except where otherwise indicated, material may be copied, downloaded and printed for private study, research and teaching purposes, or for use in non-commercial products or services, provided that appropriate acknowledgement of FAO as the source and copyright holder is given and that FAO’s endorsement of users’ views, products or services is not implied in any way.

All requests for translation and adaptation rights and for resale and other commercial use rights should be made via www.fao.org/contact-us/licence-request or addressed to copyright@fao.org.

FAO information products are available on the FAO website www.fao.org/publications and can be purchased through publications-sales@fao.org.