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### Zuma: Rising food prices a time bomb

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The rising cost of food is a time bomb that could result in uprisings, African National Congress president Jacob Zuma told the World Economic Forum on Africa on Thursday.

"The issue of food prices is actually a time bomb," he told a plenary of the forum, which is being held in Cape Town.

"With those who have the budgets to adjust, [it] is one thing. But with those who have no money to buy at all, once the food price goes up, they are cut out, even from the possibility of buying food. Then you are sitting with a situation that an uprising would emerge."

Individual governments cannot solve the problem of food insecurity, said Zuma. "We must have global solutions to global problems." He said he did not think that there was much that governments could do. "I think the world organisations must do it."

Zuma was speaking against the background of a global doubling in the price of wheat in the past year, and an almost 80% hike in the African and Asian staples maize and rice over the same period. Soaring food costs have already sparked riots in Egypt, Indonesia, Cameroon, Peru and Haiti.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned this week that food production had to rise by 50% by the year 2030 to meet rising demand.

Zuma was echoing the remarks of Trevor Manuel, Finance Minister, who insisted: "We need multilateral responses." He complained about "foot-dragging in the WTO [World Trade Organisation] about an agricultural round".

Manuel also bitterly criticised countries such as Kazakhstan and Argentina, which have banned exports of wheat. "We must not be dragooned into taking short-term decisions," he said.

"We need to ensure there is support for agriculture, but we must guard against the introduction of subsidies that become an end in itself," he said, adding that the 50% call by Ban was "interesting" but he did not know whether the goal was reachable.

Manuel also said governments should take a stand on "demand management".

"You know, in the United States, every individual consumes the equivalent of 40kg of chicken at the moment. In 1980, it was 20kg per year. That kind of demand is unsustainable because we are dependent on factors of production like soil and climate, over which we have no control.

"Governments must be involved in communication on demand management, failing which I think the wealthy are going to take everything leaving the poor destitute."

A number of other speakers at a discussion of food insecurity recommended actions that individual governments should take.

Obiageli Ezekwesili, a vice-president of the World Bank, insisted that governments must spend more money on developing agriculture. She pointed out that at independence most African countries spent 10% of their GDP on agriculture. Today they spend 3%. "We need to get it to at least 6%," she said.

Some speakers wanted to see more money spent on providing inputs to assist subsistence farmers. Glenn Denning, of the Millennium Development Goals centre in Kenya, described some of his organisation's successes in turning subsistence farmers into commercial successes. He said that in Malawi they had doubled the production of maize in the country, and in the country areas had quadrupled it.

### **Gov considers relief measures**

Meanwhile, state news agency BuaNews reported on Thursday that the government is considering immediate relief measures in the face of rising food prices.

The government may provide various supplements to the social grants already being provided, the news agency reported, citing Health Director General Thami Mseleku.

Addressing the media on the programme of action of the government's social security cluster on Wednesday, Mseleku said food security is now a key challenge facing people throughout the world.

One way of diminishing food vulnerability is through pricing, and the government intends to look at the possibility of extending zero value-added tax, already applicable to some staple items, to other foodstuffs.

In the meantime, the government is focusing on sustainable food production, where it encourages South Africans to take the issue in to their "own hands" through developing private vegetable gardens.

While this might seem a simple solution, it is a practice more widespread in other countries and needs to be encouraged among rapidly urbanising South Africans.

Mseleku said the government will start a campaign to inculcate "a culture of agricultural production" or rather, given South Africa's historic dependence on agriculture, a "recolonisation" among various sectors of South African society, such as schools, where young people can tend to communal gardens.

The campaign will not only be rolled out in cities but will also seek to affect "rural behaviour", he said.

### **Food production**

Adding to Mseleku's remarks, Agriculture and Land Affairs Director General Thozzi Gwanya said his department is implementing a campaign that will encourage food production in all provinces. Emerging farmers are to be a key focus, and the government will be providing so-called "starter packs" that will include farm implements.

While large, commercial and usually white-owned farms are central to food production, Gwanya pointed out that the contribution of South Africa's smaller farmers -- including the so-called "emerging" group of those returning to the land -- to the overall level of the country's food production is often underrated.

On the question of livestock, for instance, Gwanya said 64% of the country's goats are herded by black farmers and 45% of South Africa's cattle belong to these communities, as do 20% of pigs and 12% of sheep.

The issue now is to build the "massification" of livestock farming and food processing, he said, adding that the agriculture "starter packs" being provided to poorer communities is part of this process.

To date, 15 765 "production packages" have been distributed in poorer communities

around the country, and 6 390 vegetable gardens have been established.

About six million learners in about 18 000 schools have received meals in school-feeding programmes, and a proposal to encourage an awards system for the National School Nutrition Programme is being considered. -- I-Net Bridge, Sapa