

Global food prices up in January; cereal prices keep rising despite improved supplies – UN

2 February 2017 – Global food prices rose notably in January, led by sugar and cereals, even as markets remain well supplied, United Nations monthly figures show.

According to a press release from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the January Food Price Index – which measures the monthly change in international prices for five major food commodity groups: major cereals, vegetable oils, dairy, meat, and sugar – averaged 173.8 per cent in January, its highest value in almost two years, marking a 2.1 per cent increase from its revised December value and 16.4 per cent above the year-earlier level.

While 2016 marked the fifth consecutive year the global food price index has fallen, January marked its sixth monthly increase in a row.

Sugar prices surged 9.9 per cent in the month, driven by expectations of protracted supply tightness in Brazil, India and Thailand.

Cereal prices rose 3.4 per cent from December to a six-month high, with wheat, maize and rice values all increasing.

International prices of rice also rose, in part due to India's ongoing state procurement programme, reducing the quantities available for export.

Vegetable oil prices rose 1.8 per cent, due mostly to low global inventory levels of palm oil coupled with a slow production recovery in Southeast Asia. Soy oil prices, by contrast, eased on expectations of ample global availability.

Dairy prices remained unchanged from December, a marked departure from the 50 per cent increase it posted between May and December last year.

Meat prices were also practically unchanged, with a rise in bovine meat quotations – the result of herd rebuilding in Australia – offset by lower prices of ovine and other meats.

World cereal stocks at all-time high due to record production

Worldwide inventories of cereals are on course to reach an all-time record level by the end of seasons in 2017, according to FAO's latest Cereal Supply and Demand Brief.

Latest figures put global cereal stocks at 681 million metric tonnes, up 1.5 per cent from their December forecasted level and 3 per cent from the previous season. World wheat inventories would likely hit a new record of 245 million tonnes, marking an 8.3 per cent annual increase. Coarse grain stocks

are forecast to grow by 0.7 per cent to reach their second-highest level on record, while rice stocks are set to decline slightly although ending the season at a near-record 170 million tonnes.

FAO has also raised its estimate of global cereal output in 2016 by 15 million metric tonnes to 2,592 million tonnes, due primarily to larger-than-expected wheat harvests in Australia and Russia. For rice, excess rains over parts of Viet Nam and inadequate rainfall in Sri Lanka will likely curb rice output.

Dangerous conditions in Ukraine after heavy fighting shuts down power, water – UNICEF

2 February 2017 – More than 2,500 children in the Donetsk region of Ukraine are without heat, electricity or water, prompting the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to call for an end to fighting in the area so that the infrastructure can be repaired.

Intense fighting in the town of Avdiivka on 29 and 30 January disabled electricity and water, including the Donetsk Filtration Station and the backup reservoir.

With temperatures plummeting to 1 degree Fahrenheit (minus 17 degrees Celsius), the situation could have catastrophic consequences for the residents of Avdiivka, according to a statement from UNICEF.

The UN agency's representative in Ukraine also voiced concern about the fighting, which has also caused six schools and four kindergartens in the area to shut down.

Not only are the lives of thousands of children in Avdiivka, and on all sides of the conflict, at risk, but to make matters worse, the lack of water and electricity means that homes are becoming dangerously cold and health conditions deteriorating as we speak, said Giovanna Barberis.

In addition to the 17,000 residents in Avdiivka, the non-functional filtration station supplied some 400,000 people in area with water.

Water is now rationed and there is a possibility that the piped household water supply will stop altogether, UNICEF said.

The UN Security Council has also voiced concern about the fresh fighting. On 31 January, the Council issued a press statement saying its 15 members were gravely concerned about the situation in the country's eastern region and its

severe impact on the local civilian population.

Iran: Halt imminent execution of juvenile offender, urge UN human rights experts

2 February 2017 – Calling on the Government of Iran to immediately halt the execution of a juvenile offender whose trial was reportedly marred with lack of due process and fair trial guarantees, a group of United Nations human rights experts have urged the authorities to adopt a moratorium on juvenile executions.

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the offender, Hamid Ahmadi, was 17 years old when he was sentenced to death in 2009 for the fatal stabbing of a young man in a fight between five boys, the year before. The court relied on confessions reportedly obtained under torture and ill-treatment at a police station. Mr. Ahmadi was also denied access to a lawyer and his family.

“To our knowledge, in the case of Hamid Ahmadi, the most stringent guarantees of fair trial and due process contained in international human rights instruments have been disrespected and, the allegations of torture and confessions extracted under duress were not taken into consideration nor did the lead to any investigation,” the human rights experts said.

“Any death sentence undertaken in contravention of a Government’s international obligations, and particularly when a conviction is based on confessions extracted under torture, is unlawful and tantamount to an arbitrary execution,” they stressed.

Mr. Ahmadi’s execution, planned to take place by hanging on Saturday, 4 February, is the third time it has been scheduled. In the two previous instances, they were halted at the last minute.

OHCHR further noted that the Iranian Supreme Court had overturned the death sentence in 2009 due to some doubts about the testimony of several key witnesses but ultimately upheld the death sentence a year later.

Furthermore, following the adoption (in 2013) of new juvenile sentencing provisions of the Islamic Penal Code, Mr. Ahmadi was granted a retrial but was eventually re-sentenced to death by a Provincial Criminal Court in December 2015.

Unprecedented rate of scheduling and even conducting executions of juveniles

The experts also condemned that execution of juveniles continue to be scheduled and even conducted at an unprecedented rate in the country since the beginning of the year.

On 17 January, we already intervened to halt the execution of another juvenile, they noted.

Since then, we have learned that two other juveniles have been hanged on 15 and 18 January. Arman Bahr Asemani and Hassan Hassanzadeh were both juveniles at the time they allegedly committed the offence for which they were sentenced to death.

Underlining that that international standards unequivocally forbid the imposition and execution of the death penalty on persons below 18 years of age, the UN experts urged Iran to observe its international obligations by putting an end to the execution of juvenile offenders once and for all.

The human rights experts voicing their concern included:

Independent experts and Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva based UN Human Rights Council an inter-governmental body responsible for promoting and protecting human rights around the world to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

Low and middle income countries bear disproportionate burden of cervical cancer – UN agency

2 February 2017 – Noting that cervical cancer kills more than 250,000 women every year and that 85 per cent of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, the United Nations health agency underlined the importance of vaccinating girls against the cancer-causing virus and screening programmes to detect and treat precancerous lesions.

The agency also stressed the need to overcome cultural norms and dispel gender biases that are challenging the effectiveness of vaccination initiatives.

In high-income countries, widespread screening has radically reversed the trends, and cervical cancer incidence and mortality have declined sharply

[with] the impact of vaccination in reducing human papillomavirus (HPV)-related diseases is already being documented,” said the UN World Health Organization (WHO)'s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in a news release.

“But in developing countries, where the burden of the disease is heaviest, cervical cancer control is often not seen as a priority within tight health budgets, and women are not given life-saving access to adequate prevention and treatment,” it added.

While HPV vaccination has shown it can protect women from chronic infection caused by HPV16 and HPV18 (the two main types of the virus known to cause cervical cancer), vaccination programmes have not been implemented nationally in many low- and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa.

As a result, women are left vulnerable to the risk of developing cervical disease, which – given the inadequacy of screening and treatment services in many countries – is likely to go untreated.

“Unless we act rapidly, thousands of women will develop cervical cancer because they are not vaccinated,” says Rolando Herrero, head of Early Detection and Prevention Section at the IARC.

“In countries where early detection and screening are difficult to implement due to a lack of proper infrastructure, vaccination has a vital role to play in protecting women from cervical cancer,” he added, urging government commitment to implement HPV vaccination regimes.

In many countries, women are often the only breadwinners, and therefore protecting them is of huge human and economic importanceHead of IASC's Screening Group Dr. Sankaranarayanan

Also, in some regions, cultural norms and fear that “vaccination would promote sexual activity” is also a barrier in vaccinating young girls as are low schooling rates, which can limit the reach of immunization programmes, which often take place in schools.

On top of these hurdles, “gender bias” and perception that “women are a less important population to invest in” in many countries is making matters much worse.

“It is vital that governments address these barriers,” said Rengaswamy Sankaranarayanan, Special Advisor on Cancer Control and Head of IARC's Screening Group, stressing: “In many countries, women are often the only breadwinners, and therefore protecting them is of huge human and economic importance.”

Drawing attention to the need to make vaccines cheaper, particularly for the development world, to step up vaccination coverage, IARC Director Christopher Wild stressed: “Competition between potentially new and existing vaccine manufacturers is urgently needed in order to reduce costs and enable

countries to better protect women against cervical cancer.”

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. It is responsible to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. It is also involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and dissemination of scientific information on the disease.

EU should seek common approach to address tragic loss of life on Mediterranean – UN agencies

2 February 2017 – Ahead of a meeting of the European Council, the United Nations refugee and migration agencies have called on European leaders to take “decisive action” to save lives of migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea along its central route in hopes of a better future.

Ahead of a meeting of the European Council, the United Nations refugee and migration agencies have called on European leaders to take “decisive action” to save lives of migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea along its central route in hopes of a better future.

“To better protect refugees and migrants, we need a strong European Union that is engaged beyond its borders to protect, assist and help find solutions for people in need,” said the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in a joint statement today.

Such efforts, they noted, should include building capacity to save lives at sea or on land, strengthening the rule of law and fighting against criminal networks.

The agencies also expressed hope that the meeting, to be held tomorrow, will also help move towards the adoption of a common approach to migration by the European Union.

They also appealed for addressing “deplorable conditions” for refugees and migrants in Libya and called for concerted efforts to ensure that sustainable migration and asylum systems are established in the country and in neighbouring countries.

“This should include a significant expansion of opportunities for safe pathways such as resettlement and humanitarian admission, among others, to

avoid dangerous journeys,” the noted, urging to shift away from migration management based on “automatic detention of refugees and migrants.”

In this context, UNHCR and IOM underlined the need for creating proper reception services and building capacity to register new arrivals, support the voluntary return of migrants, process asylum claims and offer solutions to refugees.

Further, stating that they, together with partners on the ground, have made “tremendous effort” to deliver basic protection not only to refugees and migrants but also to affected local populations, which in some places are also in dire need of assistance, the UN agencies, however, expressed worry that security constraints continued to hinder their efforts.

They also outlined that given the current context, “it is not appropriate to consider Libya a safe third country nor to establish extraterritorial processing of asylum-seekers in North Africa.”

Expressing hope that humane solutions can be found end the suffering of thousands of migrants and refugees in Libya and across the region, the agencies added: “We stand ready to assist and enhance our engagement, conditions permitting.”

Last year, 2016, was the worst year in terms of people perishing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. According to preliminary figures from UNHCR, of the 363,348 people who crossed the sea, 5,079 people – almost 1 in 72 – were lost (died or missing).