

Heat-resistant crops, 'green' infrastructure, can prepare Near East and North Africa to better tackle droughts – UN agency

Countries in the Near-East and North Africa, where chronic water shortages are sure to worsen due to climate change, must take pro-active steps to become more resilient against droughts, the United Nations agriculture agency said on Friday.

Even though drought is a familiar phenomenon in the region, over the past four decades, droughts have become more widespread, prolonged and frequent – likely due to climate change. Though the region is not highly prone to drought, desert makes up three quarters of its territory, [which stretches](#) from Morocco to Iraq.

The UN [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO) warned in a [new report](#) that the Near East and North Africa's technical, administrative, and financial capacities to deal with drought are inadequate, rendering farmers and herders – the first and worst hit when drought strikes – even more vulnerable.

Even as farmers and herders face mounting challenges as water becomes scarcer, land more degraded and eroded, and soils more fragile there is still too much focus on recovering from drought rather than being less susceptible to it, the agency said.

“We need to perceive and manage droughts differently, and shift from emergency response to more pro-active policy and long-term planning to reduce risks and build greater resilience,” [said](#) Rene Castro, FAO's Assistant Director-General, Climate, Biodiversity, Land and Water Department.

Released ahead of the [World Day to Combat Desertification](#), marked annually on 17 June, the report assesses gaps in current drought management and provides a solid base to help governments rethink policies and reformulate preparedness and response plans by offering solutions that take into account each country's specific context.

Drought solutions

Along with the development and implementation of national drought management policies consistent with the country's development objectives, the report also recommends establishing early warning systems, sharing technologies to combat drought, and supporting policies and incentives to use land and water resources rationally.

Growing drought-tolerant, fast maturing and watershed crops, and encouraging

advanced methods of irrigation (including drip and spray irrigation) are some of the measures that should be adopted at larger scale to combat climate change, added the report, which was co-authored by the Water for Food Daugherty Global Institute at the University of Nebraska.

It also notes that traditional livestock herding practices – keeping stocking rates low and moving herds when forage is low – can reduce the risk of overgrazing and land degradation.

[Mali: Presidential elections critical to consolidate democracy, says UN peacekeeping chief](#)

Though the past 12 months had been the most encouraging in terms of advancing the peace process in Mali, security challenges still pose a dangerous threat, with civilians and security forces still being attacked, the top United Nations peacekeeping official told the Security Council on Thursday.

Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, [said](#) that upcoming Presidential elections, set for 29 July, must lay the foundation for consolidating democracy in the west African country.

The priority, he underscored, must be for all actors to work hand in hand for an inclusive and constructive political dialogue, conducive to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

After the elections, the focus must be on implementing the institutional aspects of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, added Mr. Lacroix.

“Parties must turn their attention to the strategic pillars of the Agreement dealing with long-term goals,” he said.

Turning to the UN integrated mission in the country, known by its French acronym, [MINUSMA](#), and its recently-concluded operational review, Mr. Lacroix said the Secretary-General was recommending a shift in its focus, prioritization and implementation of MINUSMA’s mandated tasks to maximize its role in support of the agreement and in amplifying the peace process.

Given the critical juncture in which Mali found itself, added the head of UN peacekeeping operations, the mission would intensify its reporting and monitoring efforts, while cooperating closely with other security actors, including the Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel) joint force, the Barkhane force and the European Union (EU) Training Mission in Mali.

Concluding, he said stronger support to the G-5 Sahel joint force – including predictable and sustainable financing – remained critical for reducing the risk during counter-terrorism operations.

[UN rushes to deliver aid as key Yemeni port city is 'shelled and bombarded'](#)

As the Yemeni port city of Hodeida continues to come under attack from Saudi-led coalition forces on Thursday, seeking to drive out Houthi rebels who control the city, the United Nations and humanitarian partners are rushing to provide life-saving assistance to thousands of vulnerable families there.

“Dozens of UN staff are in the city helping to deliver food, water and health services,” said Lise Grande, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, in statement. “We estimate that 600,000 civilians are in the city – many of whom are dependent on assistance to survive.”

According to news reports, the assault on the crucial entry point for most of the war-torn country’s essential food imports, began early on Wednesday, after diplomatic attempts to prevent the Yemeni government forces and their allies from launching the offensive, failed.

“Humanitarian partners have been preparing for a possible assault for weeks. Agencies have prepositioned 63,000 metric tonnes of food, tens of thousands of emergency kits, nutrition supplies, water and fuel. Medical teams have been dispatched and humanitarian service points established.”

“Yesterday, even as the city was being shelled and bombarded, an UN-contracted vessel, which is docked at Hodeidah port, off-loaded thousands of metric tonnes of food. Two more vessels are making preparations to do the same”, she said.

On Thursday, partners have been distributing emergency boxes with food and hygiene supplies to civilians displaced by the fighting, south of the city.

Humanitarian agencies and front-line partners already have substantial aid programmes in the city. Every day 50,000 litres of safe drinking water are being distributed and health teams have been helping to halt the spread of cholera and other life-threatening diseases.

“Under international humanitarian law, parties to the conflict are obliged to do everything possible to protect civilians and ensure they have access to the assistance they need to survive,” said Ms. Grande.

The UN and partners are requesting \$3 billion through the 2018 Humanitarian

Response Plan to support 22.2 million people in need across Yemen. To date, \$1.5 billion, half of resources necessary for the year, has been received.

The Security Council is expected to meet on Yemen in closed-door consultations on Thursday.

[LETTER FROM AFGHANISTAN: Elections serve up food for thought, for Afghan youth](#)

By Philip Smucker

At the newly-established “50/50” fast food restaurant on the tree-lined streets of Herat, in the west of Afghanistan, business is brisk as deliveries are whisked away, on the back of motorbikes to hungry customers across the ancient city.

But for the people of Herat, it’s more than pizza and sandwiches that are on their minds; the real food for thought is whether to participate in key parliamentary and district elections in October later this year. Many Afghans say they are weary of politics and politicians, and many will not cast their ballots in the upcoming polls.

The 50/50 restaurant owner, 26-year-old Farhad Majidi, said he is now convinced of the need to be part of the democratic process. “I’ve decided I will register. It is a developing situation, but we are crossing from old generation to the next; in some cases from warlords to well-informed youth. This generation, of which I am a part, believes wholeheartedly in democracy. And we are the Afghan generation that increasingly has the power to build the future.”

In a country that is still recovering from years of conflict and in which extremist groups regularly carry out attacks against civilians, these elections, and a presidential vote that will take place in 2019, are considered an important step in Afghanistan’s path towards peace, reconciliation, democracy and a future that includes all Afghans.



UNAMA/Fardin Waezi

Voter registration is underway in Afghanistan ahead of elections in October 2018.

United Nations support

Afghan candidates will contest 249 seats in the National Assembly, whose representatives serve five year terms. Crucially, district-wide voting will also take place, offering local representation for even the most remote regions of the country. Despite the ambitious plan, many registration centres remain closed due to security concerns.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), along with the broader international community, is supporting the Afghan-led elections process in various ways, including through the provision of technical assistance and procurement support.

Although the Independent Election Commission (IEC) says that more than three million Afghans have registered to vote, challenges remain, particularly outside large urban centres. In remoter areas, the process of registering to vote remains hindered by constant threats from insurgent groups, who have boasted about their interference locally and nationally.



UNAMA/Fraidoon Poya

Afghan women register as voters in Sultan High School, Herat province.

Social media chatter

There is evidence that young people like Farhad Majidi are now more committed to the democratic process. “We are seeing lively chat on social media about these elections, particularly from young Afghans,” said Fraidoon Poya, who works in UNAMA’s Herat regional office. “We also see educated youth, including many women, putting their names forward as candidates. The young are quite hopeful, and we do our best to support public debate and dialogue from candidates and voters by supporting events through the media.”

Afghan officials had said in April that they hoped to register as many as 14 million voters, an ambitious target “Right now, registration is going well in Herat City, but there are continuing threats from insurgent groups keen to upend the democratic process,” said Fraidoon Poya.



UNAMA/Jaffar Rahim

Afghan men and women register as voters at a centre in Bamyān ahead of elections in October 2018.

Security challenges

Despite the optimism, security remains a challenge across the country. In 2014, insurgent groups warned voters not to vote in the presidential election and the subsequent run-off, later admitting to cutting off the index fingers in eleven instances in one province, where citizens did not heed their demand.

Nearly two decades of international economic assistance has not brought stability, and the past decade has seen a deterioration of the security situation in some regions of the country. Although President Ashraf Ghani has presented an open offer for peace talks with the country's main insurgent grouping, the Taliban, no official peace process has taken shape.

The democratic process has been marred again this year by violence, prompting UNAMA's chief, Tadamichi Yamamoto, to caution in early May that fresh attacks on registration stations were "nothing less than an assault on democracy."

In eastern Afghanistan, the registration process improved following the banning of motorcycles, which are sometimes used for hit-and-run attacks.

Efforts, led by the IEC, to create voting measures that prevent fraud and help protect every citizen's right to vote are also underway, a process which has progressed with stops, starts and rethinks, eliciting intense public criticism.

Despite those concerns, United Nations officials familiar with the efforts to register and get out the vote in Afghanistan, say that enthusiasm and interest has grown in one key demographic segment of society – that of Afghanistan's younger generation.

[Afghanistan: UN envoy urges further extension of ceasefire with Taliban, as Eid al-Fitr gets underway](#)

Expressing solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, the United Nations envoy in the country has expressed hope that the temporary ceasefires marking the final days of the holy month of Ramadan in the war-battered nation, will lead to the lasting peace that Afghans so badly "want and deserve."

In a [statement](#), issued on Thursday, Tadamichi Yamamoto, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan urged “all parties to the conflict to honour the announced ceasefires and respect this time of reflection, tolerance and solidarity.”

Earlier this month, the Government of Afghanistan had [announced](#) a temporary ceasefire, starting on the 27th day of Ramadan, 12 June, and running through the end of Ramadan on Thursday, into the third day of the Eid-ul-Fitr festival, which begins on Friday.

A few days later, the Taliban also [announced](#) a three-day partial ceasefire during Eid al-Fitr.

The “historic” announcements ahead of Eid, Mr. Yamamoto said, “will allow Afghan families across the country to come together peacefully in the days ahead, in what is, for now, a temporary respite from war.”

“I sincerely hope the sense of solidarity marked by this joyful occasion will continue well into the future, enabling the extension of the ceasefires and leading to the peace that all Afghans want and deserve,” he said.