

## UN: Number of hungry people declines

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FAO director-general Jacques Diouf attends a press conference in Rome, Tuesday, Sept. 14, 2010. The estimated number of chronically hungry people in the world dipped considerably below the 1 billion mark, thanks in part to a drop in food prices from the spikes that sparked rioting just a few years ago, U.N. agencies said Tuesday. They cautioned that the estimate, the first drop in 15 years, is no cause for celebration since there are still an estimated 925 million undernourished people on the planet. A report by the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that there are 98 million fewer than in 2009, when the estimate just topped the 1 billion figure. (AP Photo/Pier Paolo Cito)

(AP) -- The number of chronically hungry people in the world dipped considerably below the 1 billion mark - the first drop in 15 years - thanks partly to a fall in food prices after spikes that sparked rioting a few years ago, U.N. agencies said Tuesday.

Still, an estimated 925 million people are undernourished worldwide, and the latest figures don't reflect the repercussions from the massive

flooding in Pakistan.

The Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization's report suggested some progress in the battle to end hunger, but stressed the world is far from achieving the U.N. promoted Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of undernourished people from 20 percent in 1990-92 to 10 percent in 2015.

The report estimated there are 98 million fewer chronically hungry people than in 2009, when the figure just topped 1 billion.

U.N. officials announcing the figures said that 1,800 calories per day is considered the minimum [energy intake](#) on average. Anyone regularly without that intake would be considered undernourished, or "chronically hungry."

The drop in the chronically hungry is partly because food prices have fallen from peaks in 2007-2008, when they sparked violence in several developing countries, and because cereal and rice harvests have been strong. Cereal production this year was the third-highest ever recorded, despite a drought-fueled wheat shortfall in Russia, said FAO director-general Jacques Diouf.

Also heartening, Diouf noted, is that cereal stocks are high - some 100 million tons more than the low levels of 2007-2008, when some 38 countries shut down their food export markets in reaction. Increased demand for biofuels and soaring petroleum prices took much of the blame for the spiraling upward prices then.

Food prices are still "stubbornly" high, but "we haven't seen the type of behavior .... panic buying" that helped feed the speculation and fears of a couple of years ago, said Josette Sheeran, the executive director of the U.N. World Food Program.

Earlier this month, a U.N. human rights expert urged governments to crack down on price speculation and boost food production. Deadly riots over food prices hit Mozambique recently, and FAO has called a special meeting for Sept. 24 to discuss recently rising [food](#) prices.

The drop below the 1 billion mark also reflects progress China and India have made in feeding their own.

Still, those two nations, with their huge populations, account for 40 percent of the world's undernourished people. Overall, two-thirds of the chronically undernourished live in either China, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo or Ethiopia, the report said.

The flooding in Pakistan is also a variable that could affect future numbers. The floods have affected millions and robbed farmers of crops about to be harvested, next season's farmland and much seed.

While welcoming the dip in the number of hungry, the non-governmental aid agency Oxfam attributed the improvement largely "to luck" and not to a change in policies or increased investment "needed to address the underlying causes in hunger."

"There simply isn't enough agriculture investment today," added Yukiko Omura, vice president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, a U.N. agency that emphasizes helping small-scale farming in developing countries.

FAO's Diouf noted that only a small fraction - \$420 million - of the \$20 billion in agricultural development assistance pledged by the 2009 Group of Eight developed nations summit and \$2 billion more from a later G-20 meeting has materialized.

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