

With cheap food imports, Haiti can't feed itself

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- The earthquake not only smashed markets, collapsed warehouses and left more than 2.5 million people without enough to eat. It may also have shaken up the way the developing world gets food.

Decades of inexpensive imports - especially rice from the U.S. - punctuated with abundant aid in various crises have destroyed local agriculture and left impoverished countries such as Haiti unable to feed themselves.

While those policies have been criticized for years in aid worker circles, world leaders focused on fixing Haiti are admitting for the first time that loosening trade barriers has only exacerbated hunger in Haiti and elsewhere.

They're led by former U.S. President Bill Clinton - now U.N. special envoy to Haiti - who publicly apologized this month for championing policies that destroyed Haiti's rice production. Clinton in the mid-1990s encouraged the impoverished country to dramatically cut tariffs on imported U.S. rice.

"It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake," Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 10. "I had to live everyday with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did; nobody else."

Clinton and former President George W. Bush, who are spearheading U.S. fundraising for Haiti, arrive Monday in Port-au-Prince. Then comes a key Haiti donors' conference on March 31 at the United Nations in New York.

Those opportunities present the country with its best chance in decades to build long-term food production, and could provide a model for other developing countries struggling to feed themselves.

"A combination of food aid, but also cheap imports have ... resulted in a lack of investment in Haitian farming, and that has to be reversed," U.N. humanitarian chief John Holmes told The Associated Press. "That's a global phenomenon, but Haiti's a prime example. I think this is where we should start."

Haiti's government is asking for \$722 million for agriculture, part of an overall request of \$11.5 billion.

That includes money to fix the estimated \$31 million of quake damage to agriculture, but much more for future projects restoring Haiti's dangerous and damaged watersheds, improving irrigation and infrastructure, and training farmers and providing them with better support.

Haitian President Rene Preval, an agronomist from the rice-growing Artibonite Valley, is also calling for food aid to be stopped in favor of agricultural investment.

Today Haiti depends on the outside world for nearly all of its sustenance. The most current government needs assessment - based on numbers from 2005 - is that 51 percent of the food consumed in the country is imported, including 80 percent of all rice eaten.

The free-food distributions that filled the shattered capital's plazas with swarming hungry survivors of the Jan. 12 earthquake have ended, but the U.N. World Food Program is continuing targeted handouts expected to reach 2.5 million people this month. All that food has been imported - though the agency recently put out a tender to buy locally grown rice.

Street markets have reopened, filled with honking trucks, drink sellers clinking bottles and women vendors crouched behind rolled-down sacks of dry goods. People buy what's cheapest, and that's American-grown rice.

The best-seller comes from Riceland Foods in Stuttgart, Arkansas, which sold six pounds for \$3.80 last month, according to Haiti's National Food Security Coordination Unit. The same amount of Haitian rice cost \$5.12.

"National rice isn't the same, it's better quality. It tastes better. But it's too expensive for people to buy," said Leonne Fedelone, a 50-year-old vendor.

Riceland defends its market share in Haiti, now the fifth-biggest export market in the world for American rice.

But for Haitians, near-total dependence on imported food has been a disaster.

Cheap foreign products drove farmers off their land and into overcrowded cities. Rice, a grain with limited nutrition once reserved for special occasions in the Haitian diet, is now a staple.

Imports also put the country at the mercy of international prices: When they spiked in 2008, rioters unable to afford rice smashed and burned buildings. Parliament ousted the prime minister.

Now it could be happening again. Imported rice prices are up 25 percent since the quake - and would likely be even higher if it weren't for the flood of food aid, said WFP market analyst Ceren Gurkan.

Three decades ago things were different. Haiti imported only 19 percent of its food and produced enough rice to export, thanks in part to protective tariffs of 50 percent set by the father-son dictators, Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier.

When their reign ended in 1986, free-market advocates in Washington and Europe pushed Haiti to tear those market barriers down. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, freshly reinstalled to power by Clinton in 1994, cut the rice tariff to 3 percent.

Impoverished farmers unable to compete with the billions of dollars in subsidies paid by the U.S. to its growers abandoned their farms. Others turned to more environmentally destructive crops, such as beans, that are harvested quickly but hasten soil erosion and deadly floods.

There have been some efforts to restore Haiti's agriculture in recent years: The U.S. Agency for International Development has a five-year program to improve farms and restore watersheds in five Haitian regions. But the \$25 million a year pales next to the \$91.4 million in U.S.-grown food aid delivered just in the past 10 weeks.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization also distributed 28 tons of bean seeds in mountainous areas this month, with plans this week to distribute 49 tons of corn.

The G8 group of the world's wealthiest nations pledged \$20 billion for farmers in poor countries last year. The head of the FAO called this week for some to be given to Haiti.

President Barack Obama's administration has pledged to support agriculture in developing nations. U.S. Republican Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana has sponsored legislation to create a White House Global Food Security coordinator to improve long-term agriculture worldwide, with a budget of \$8.5 billion through 2014.

Even Haiti's most powerful food importers have joined the push for locally produced food.

"I would prefer to buy everything locally and have nothing to import," said businessman Reginald Boulos, who is also president of Haiti's chamber of commerce.

But one group staunchly opposes reducing food exports to Haiti: the exporters themselves.

"Haiti doesn't have the land nor the climate ... to produce enough rice," said Bill Reed, Riceland's vice president of communications. "The productivity of U.S. farmers helps feed countries which cannot feed themselves."