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Even as Africa Hungers, Policy Slows Delivery of US Food Aid

By Celia W. Dugger
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Traveling to school in wobbly dugout canoes, Munalula Muhau and her three cousins, 7- and 8-year-olds whose parents had died from AIDS, held onto just one possession: battered tin bowls to receive their daily ration of gruel. Within weeks, those rations, provided by the United Nations World Food Program, are at risk of running out for them and 500,000 other paupers, including thousands of people wasted by AIDS who are being treated with American-financed drugs that make them hungrier as they grow healthy.

“Not to put too fine a point on it,” said Jeffrey Stringer, an American doctor who runs a nonprofit group treating more than 50,000 Zambians with AIDS, “but it will result in the death of some patients.” Hoping to forestall such a dire outcome, the World Food Program made an urgent appeal in February for cash donations so it could buy corn from Zambia’s own bountiful harvest, piled in towering stacks in the warehouses of the capital, Lusaka.

But the law in the United States requires that virtually all its donated food be grown in America and shipped at great expense across oceans, mostly on vessels that fly American flags and employ American crews — a process that typically takes four to six months. For a third year, the Bush administration, which has pushed to make foreign aid more efficient, is trying to change the law to allow the United States to use up to a quarter of the budget of its main food aid program to buy food in developing countries during emergencies. The proposal has run into stiff opposition from a potent alliance of agribusiness, shipping and charitable groups with deep financial stakes in the current food aid system.

Oxfam, the international aid group, and other proponents of the Bush proposal say it would enable the United States to feed more people more quickly, while helping to fight poverty by buying the crops of peasants in poor countries. The United States Agency for International Development estimated that if Congress adopted the Bush proposal, the United States could annually feed at least a million more people for six months and save 50,000 more lives.

But Congress quickly killed the plan in each of the past two years, cautioning that untying food aid from domestic interest groups would weaken the commitment that has made the United States by far the largest food aid donor in a world where 850 million go hungry. Representative Tom Lantos, Democrat of California and chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, warned last year at a food aid conference in Washington that decoupling food aid from American maritime and agribusiness interests was “beyond insane.”

“It is a mistake of gigantic proportions,” he said, “because support for such a program will vanish overnight, overnight.”

But James Kunder, acting deputy administrator of the development agency, said in an interview that the administration proposal, which would affect less than half of 1 percent of American agricultural exports, would not undercut American interests.

“The burden of proof is on producers and shippers to show this is going to significantly damage their interests,” he said, “because we can provide compelling evidence that allowing local procurement is going to save lives by speeding up delivery of supplies.”

Here in Zambia, population 11 million, more than a million children are already orphaned, mostly because AIDS killed their parents. Life expectancy has plunged to 38 years, and countless sickened adults, unable to work, can no longer feed their families. On a recent day, patients on American-financed AIDS drugs and their families streamed into a food distribution point at the Lewanika Hospital in the town of Mongu. Already, as the World Food Program’s stocks were running low, rations had been almost halved. Some were so hungry that they scooped handfuls of corn-soy powder into their mouths without even adding water to make porridge. One of the patients, Annie Mubita, a 32-year-old mother of six, said her strength was returning, and so was her appetite, which had shriveled when she was sick. Mrs. Mubita assumes her children are also H.I.V. positive, she said, but has not had them tested because if they, too, go on the drugs, they will be as hungry as she is.

“If the children have an appetite like me, the food won’t last even two weeks,” she said. If the rations end, she said, “me and my children will die.”

Kandundu Litia, a 12-year-old orphan with AIDS, also fears a cutoff of food. The donated corn helps her impoverished foster family — an H.I.V.-positive aunt and uncle and their children — to take care of her. Only in the months since the rations began has there been enough for her to eat three meals a day. The short shock of hair springing from her head still had the telltale reddish tint of the malnourished.

David Stevenson, who leads the World Food Program’s Zambia office and has worked for the organization in Africa for 15 years, through war and drought, says he has never seen a crisis on the scale of what AIDS and drought have wrought in Zambia. With cash donations, he and others say, the World Food Program could get Zambian corn to the hungry in a month.

The cash would also stretch further than importing food. In recent years, the World Food Program has procured 75 percent more food for Zambia, Kenya and Uganda by buying corn grown in those countries rather than shipping American food,

according to Michigan State University agricultural economists who studied crop and shipping data. There is hope that Zambia, a relatively stable democracy, can become a breadbasket in a region roiled by conflict, disease and economic collapse, at least in years when it is not devastated by drought.

In lean years, the World Food Program shuts down its buying operation here for fear of driving up the prices of corn, the main staple, beyond the reach of poor consumers. It imports food instead. But during bumper harvests, the World Food Program has become a major buyer of Zambian-grown corn. One of its biggest suppliers is Zambia's Food Reserve Agency, which buys from farmers' cooperatives and unions as a way of helping small-scale farmers gain access to markets. Since 2001, it has bought more than \$1 billion worth of food in some of the poorest countries on earth.

For farmers like Catherine Hangama, 36, that money makes all the difference. She works a small plot with her husband in the village of Nakandyoli in the Mumbwa district. For the first time last year, they sold a small surplus of corn — six 50-kilogram bags — for \$53 to the Zambian government's Food Reserve Agency, one of the World Food Program's biggest suppliers here. That money bought soap and paid for uniforms and fees to send three children to school. This year, she and her husband have planted more and hope to sell 15 bags after this year's harvest.

"If I don't plow well, the children won't be able to go to school," she explained, with one twin baby at her breast and the other on her back. What Ms. Hangama earns is a pittance compared with the billions at stake for the main players in American food aid. Over the past three years, the same four companies and their subsidiaries — Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Bunge and the Cal Western Packaging Corporation — have sold the American government more than half the \$2.2 billion in food for Food for Peace, the largest food aid program, and two smaller programs, according to the Department of Agriculture.

Shipping companies were paid \$1.3 billion over the same period to move the food aid overseas, the department's figures show. Nonprofit groups received over \$500 million in donated American food, which they sold at market rates in developing countries to raise money for antipoverty programs, according to the international development agency, and a recent study by Emmy Simmons, a retired agency official.

Agribusiness and shipping groups vigorously oppose the Bush administration proposal to buy food in developing countries with cash, which they argue is more likely to be stolen. They say that American food is safer and of higher quality and that the government can speed delivery by storing it in warehouses around the world. And they defend the idea that federal

spending should benefit American business and farming interests, as well as the hungry. Without support from such interest groups, food aid budgets from Congress would wither, they say.

"It would be at extreme risk of being diminished," said Paul B. Green, a consultant to the North American Millers' Association, a trade group for the milling industry that counts Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge and Horizon Milling, a joint venture of Cargill and CHS Inc. among its members. Gloria Tosi, a lobbyist and immediate past president of the American Maritime Congress, an association of United States-flag ship owners, agreed. "There's no constituency for cash," she said.

Many charitable groups involved in food aid share that worry, and also warn that a badly managed program to buy food in poor countries could drive up food prices and worsen hunger. The Alliance for Food Aid, made up of 14 nonprofit groups involved in distributing and selling American food aid overseas, maintains that the Bush proposal is too ambitious and advocates a modest pilot program.

"Do a demonstration," said Robert Zachritz, a senior policy adviser at World Vision. "Does it work? Then you can go from there." For now, the World Food Program says it hopes that other rich nations or individuals will donate cash to keep rations flowing for the half million needy Zambians, among them Munalula and 135,000 children fed through community schools. The pupils in this grass hut schoolhouse are from families so poor they cannot afford the flip-flops and \$6 uniforms required to attend public schools.

Beatrice Nyambe, 64, a retired public school teacher who serves without pay as principal, worries that when food from school runs out, most of the children will go back to day work in the fields so they can buy a few handfuls of cornmeal to fill their bellies. Munalula, whose own mother was an untrained teacher before AIDS took her, is the best student in the school and wants to be a teacher as well. She helps her cousins with their homework, scratching out numbers in the dirt with a stick.

At school, she and 50 other children in the dirt-floored classroom in the village of Nalusheke fell silent but for the smacking sounds they made eating a boiled mush of American bulgur wheat. Each bowlful, topped with split peas from Canada, cost 12 cents. The bulgur came from sacks emblazoned with the words, "Gift of the people of the United States of America." Munalula and her barefoot cousins scraped their bowls clean, savoring each unsweetened bite. But some children barely touched theirs. Sisi Negenda, a 6-year-old with little braids, shyly explained. She has a younger sister, 3, and several orphaned relatives at home. She said she wanted to share with them. She carried off the bowl, still heavy with porridge, as though it were a precious, breakable object.