

# Food supplies fall short in 35 countries

by Marcia Merry Baker

The maps shown here are based on the September report, plus updates, of the Rome-based UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture. The dimensions of the agriculture crises shown, and widespread food shortages — affecting 35 countries, home to 775 million people — document that we face a *systemic* crisis in national economies, not simply some perverse coincidence of “natural” disasters.

**Figure 1** shows the 35 countries where there are shortfalls in the food supply, requiring food aid and other relief. There are poor harvests coming in, as of fall 1998, in 22 countries, as shown in **Figure 2** and the accompanying table.

As the table shows, the immediate cause of the low harvests, is adverse weather. Central American nations were devastated by Hurricane Mitch. China suffered huge flood damage in the Yangtze River basin this year, as crops were literally washed out of the fields. However, the overriding factor of whether food supply shortfalls necessarily result, is whether infrastructure and food reserves have been built up.

During recent decades of “free” trade, liberal economics, nations were pressured *not* to build up in-depth agriculture infrastructure and productive potential. At the same time, food reserves are considered unlawful and “market distorting,” under the rules of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). This approach is a guaranteed prescription for famine.

The notable exception to the WTO/“free trade” policies, has been China, home to 1.2 billion people, where agricultural productive capacity and infrastructure are being built up. China is not in the food shortfall category — obviously, not for reasons of enjoying good weather, but because of a national food security policy.

In contrast, Russia, with 147 million people, has seen its agriculture base eroded over the 1990s, by shock-therapy “reforms” demanded of the nation, beginning in the Bush-

FIGURE 1

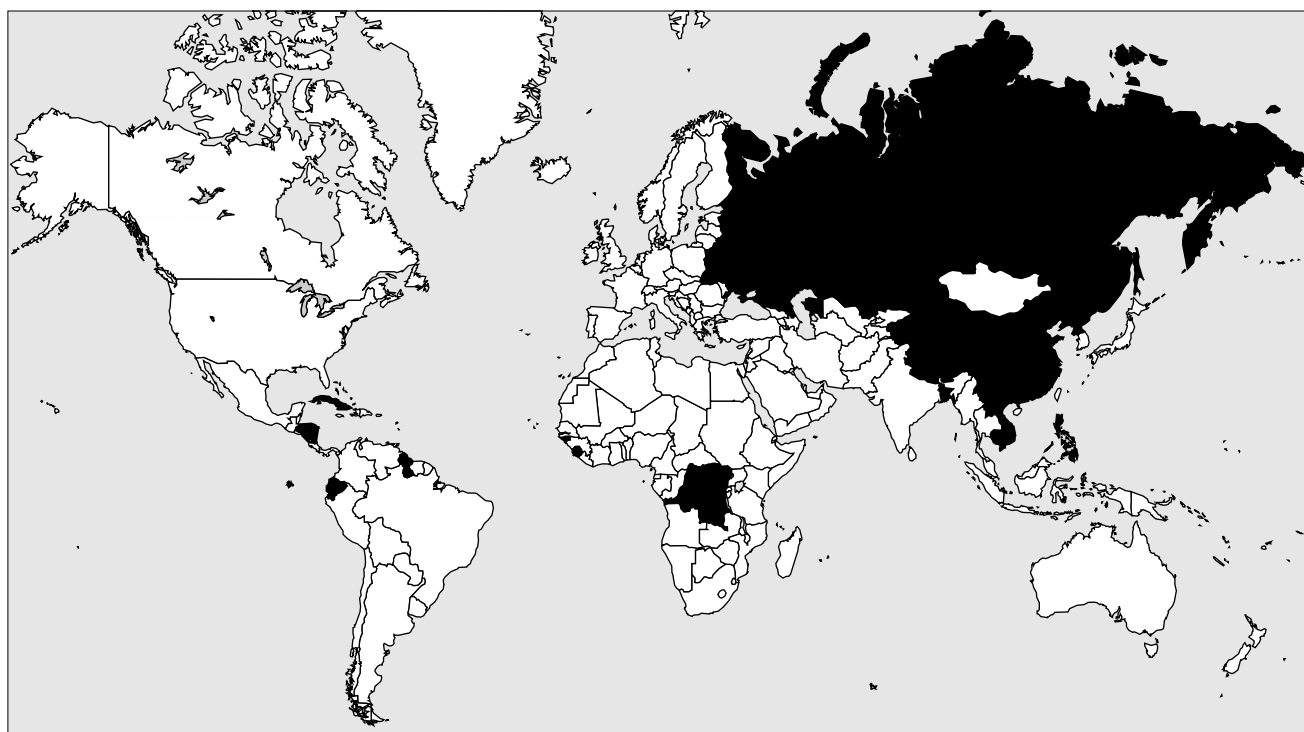
## Shortfall in food supply, fall 1998—35 countries



Source: U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

FIGURE 2

**Poor crop prospects, fall 1998—22 countries**



**Poor harvests in 22 nations, fall 1998**

Location	Harvest date	Main contributing factor	Location	Harvest date	Main contributing factor
<b>C.I.S.</b>			<b>Africa</b>		
Belarus	July-Oct.	Adverse weather	Congo	Sept.-Oct.	Strife
Kazakstan	July-Oct.	Adverse weather	Guinea Bissau	Oct.-Nov.	Strife
Moldova	July-Oct.	Adverse weather	Sierra Leone	Sept.-Dec.	Strife
Russia	July-Oct.	Adverse weather	Suriname	Sept.-Oct.	Drought
Ukraine	July-Oct.	Adverse weather			
<b>Asia</b>			<b>Central and South America</b>		
Bangladesh	Nov.-Jan.	Floods	Cuba	Sept.-Dec.	Input shortages, drought, reduced plantings
Cambodia	December	Drought	Ecuador	May-Sept.	Poor weather, reduced plantings
China	Nov.-Dec.	Floods	Guyana	Sept.-Oct.	Reduced plantings, drought
Laos	Nov.-Dec.	Drought	Honduras	Sept.-Oct.	Hurricane, floods
Nepal	Nov.-Dec.	Floods, landslides	Nicaragua	Sept.-Dec.	Hurricane, floods
North Korea	Sept.-Dec.	Reduced inputs, poor weather			
Philippines	Aug.-Sept.	Drought			
Viet Nam	October	Drought			

Source: U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

Thatcher period. Output potential was undermined for crops (low rates of fertilizer application, and other inputs), for live-stock (numbers have fallen by 30-45%), and import-dependence was enforced. Then, as of Aug. 17, with the devaluation of the ruble and other financial measures, imports suddenly stopped. At the same time, the nation was hit by severe drought early in the crop year, then fierce rains during harvest.

The 1998 grain crop is a 50-year record low!

If the United States follows up its food aid package for Russia, announced earlier this month, with a traditional Food for Peace approach of combining aid to build up Russia's agriculture, along with humanitarian relief, then a strategic path is shown to how nations can collaborate to reverse the breakdown process shown on these maps.