

Man-Made Hunger

Thirty countries have already seen food riots this year. The ever higher cost of food could push tens of millions of people into abject poverty and starvation.

To a large degree, this crisis is man-made — the result of misguided energy and farm policies. When President Bush and other heads of state of the Group of 8 leading industrial nations meet in Japan this week, they must accept their full share of responsibility and lay out clearly what they will do to address this crisis.

To start, they must live up to their 2005 commitment to vastly increase aid to the poorest countries. And they must push other wealthy countries, like those in the Middle East, to help too. That will not be enough. They must also commit to reduce, or even better, do away with their most egregious agricultural and energy subsidies, which contribute to the spread of hunger throughout the world.

In the last year, the price of corn has risen 70 percent; wheat 55 percent; rice 160 percent. The World Bank estimates that for a group of 41 poor countries the combined shock of rising prices of food, oil and other raw materials over the past 18 months will cost them between 3 and 10 percent of their annual economic output.

Some of the causes are out of governments' control, including the rising cost of energy and fertilizer, and drought in food exporters like Australia. Higher consumption of animal protein in China and India has also driven demand for feed grains. Wrongheaded policies among rich and poor nations are also playing a big role.

Of those, perhaps the most wrongheaded are the tangle of subsidies, mandates and tariffs to encourage the production of biofuels from crops in the United States and the European Union. According to the World Bank, almost all of the growth in global corn production from 2004 to 2007 was devoted to American ethanol production — pushing up corn and animal feed prices and prompting farmers to switch from other crops to corn.

Long-standing farm subsidies in the rich world have also contributed to the crisis, ruining farmers in poor countries and depressing agricultural investment.

Rich countries are not the only culprits. At least 30 developing countries have imposed restrictions or bans on the export of foodstuffs. Importing countries are now stockpiling supplies, which takes more food from global markets. Export barriers also reduce farmers' profits and discourage them from investing in more production.

So far there is no sign that the leaders of the developed countries are ready to do what is needed. The United States and Europe have refused to curtail their bio-fuel subsidies or their lavish farm subsidies. They are also falling far short of their aid commitments.

At the 2005 G8 summit meeting, leaders said that by 2010 wealthier nations would increase annual development aid to poor countries by \$50 billion. Yet aid has increased by only \$11 billion. And there is suspicion that the G8 nations, who were to provide the lion's share of the increase, want to wiggle out of their commitment.

We welcome President Bush's pledge to provide \$5 billion this year and next to "fight global hunger," but much more must be done. The United States remains the stingiest of rich nations when it come to foreign aid.

In a letter to heads of state of the G8, Robert Zoellick, the World Bank president, estimated that the bank needs \$3.5 billion to provide immediate food aid and seed and fertilizer in poor countries. The International Monetary Fund and the World Food Program estimate they need \$6.5 billion more in the short term to help feed vulnerable populations. This does not even count the need for essential longer-term investments to increase farm productivity in poor nations in Africa and elsewhere.

As Mr. Zoellick wrote, the food crisis is a test of the world's willingness to help the most vulnerable. The leaders gathered in Japan must rise to the challenge.