

1. CHAD: Prices hike, teachers strike

N'DJAMENA, 17 February 2010 (IRIN) - Teachers demanding more pay to face higher food prices entered the third day of a nationwide strike. The government has called their demands "illegal" and "unjustified", because the "high cost of living is a general problem that does not concern only [the teachers' union]", said Employment Minister Fatim ♦ Tchombi.

Primary school teacher Aubin Golmbaye told IRIN his US\$200 monthly salary was not enough to feed his family. "In addition to food I need to pay for the house, medical care, school fees - even if I spend \$4 a day on food, what would I have left for our other needs, and transport to get to work?"

Government has estimated that poor rainfall in 2009 reduced cereal production by 31 percent reduction compared to previous years. The shortage could keep cereal prices, which are higher than they have been for five years, at current levels through March, according to the US-funded early warning group, FEWS NET.

Poor families, who often barter livestock for other foodstuffs, find that their animals are buying them less. High prices and below-normal pastoral income due to disease and animal malnutrition are depleting what little food stock families saved from the last growing season, and "steep" food price hikes, starting in April, were predicted in FEWS NET's most recent report on food security in Chad.

Final exams are scheduled to begin in late May but secondary school student Clarisse Koularambaye feared the academic year could be lost. "We are not in class. Teachers plan to strike until a solution is found - I just hope the government will do something for us," she told IRIN.

Education Minister Khadidja Hassaballah said the government would not negotiate salaries with the teacher union when all public sector employees faced the same cost of living.

Among primary school-age children, 30 percent of girls are enrolled and 40 percent of boys; by the time they reach secondary school, only five percent of girls and 13 percent of boys in that age group still attend school.

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