

World could face food crisis in wake of coronavirus: UN, WTO

April 1 2020, by Isabel Malsang



Panic buying as people faced lockdowns demonstrated the fragility of food chains

The heads of three global agencies warned Wednesday of a potential worldwide food shortage if authorities fail to manage the ongoing

coronavirus crisis properly.

Many governments around the world have put their populations on lockdown to slow the spread of the virus but that has resulted in severe slow-downs in international trade and food supply chains.

Meanwhile panic buying by people going into isolation has already demonstrated the fragility of supply chains as supermarket shelves emptied in many countries.

"Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market," said the joint text signed by Qu Dongyu, head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Roberto Azevedo, director of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

That is not an idle threat. After the 2007 global financial crisis, rice producing countries India and Vietnam restricted exports to ward off expected price increases. The result: food riots in several developing countries as the price of rice soared.

The warning could be directed at Russia as officials there have mulled restricting wheat exports and have already tapped the nation's reserves to ensure prices don't jump.

"In the midst of the COVID-19 lockdowns, every effort must be made to ensure that trade flows as freely as possible, specially to avoid food shortage(s)" from developing, the joint statement said.

"When acting to protect the health and well-being of their citizens, countries should ensure that any trade-related measures do not disrupt the food supply chain," it added.



Stocking up while supplies last

Over the longer term, confinement orders and travel restrictions risk causing disruptions in agricultural production due to the unavailability of agricultural labour and the inability to get food to markets.

"Such disruptions including hampering the movement of agricultural and food industry workers and extending border delays for food containers, result in the spoilage of perishables and increasing food waste," the three leaders noted.

Closing borders has exposed just how much certain countries are dependant upon foreign workers to bring in crops.

Just start of crisis

Unless solutions are found quickly the lack of seasonal farm labourers from Mexico puts the production of many crops in the United States at risk. In Western Europe the absence of workers from North Africa and Eastern Europe could produce a similar result.

"We are just at the start of this crisis," said FAO senior economist Abdolreza Abbassian, who judged it to be one more of transport and logistics rather than production.

He believes what happens in India, which is under a nationwide lockdown for another two weeks, will be key given the size of its population and role as an exporter.

"Harvests are beginning in several weeks, the fluid movement of goods must be assured," he told AFP in a telephone interview.



In France, farmers worry now about who will pick and pack strawberries

The FAO, WHO and WTO leaders also stressed the need to protect employees engaged in food production, processing and distribution, both for their own health and that of others, as well as to maintain food supply chains.

Supermarket cashiers are among those who have succumbed to the virus in Italy and France, where some workers have staged walkouts over the lack of measures and equipment to protect them.

Upscale Whole Foods Markets in the United States is also facing work stoppages.

The last few years have seen international cooperation wilt, with US President Donald Trump snubbing international agreements and institutions and launching trade wars.

But the FAO, WHO and WTO said working together is needed to avoid food shortages brought on by measures to combat the novel coronavirus.

"It is at times like these that more, not less, international cooperation is essential," they said.

"We must ensure that our response to COVID-19 does not unintentionally create unwarranted shortages of essential items and exacerbate hunger and malnutrition."

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