

RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR AND THE ISSUE OF FOOD SECURITY IN PAKISTAN

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Russia–Ukraine war has disrupted agricultural production and trade from one of the world’s major food-exporting regions. Both countries are known as the breadbasket of the world and are fifth largest exporters of wheat. The war threatens to drive rising food prices even higher and create scarcity, especially for regions most dependent on wheat and other exports from Russia and Ukraine. ¹ The Economist reports that the war is creating one of the worst disruptions to the supply of wheat since the first world war. As prices spike, the damage from this shock will ripple right across the world affecting corn, vegetable oil, fertilisers, and many other agricultural products. ² Similarly, the World Bank also reports that the war has not only resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis and a looming increase in global food insecurity, but also in the potential break-up of global cooperation in trade. This could result in a massive 37% jump in food prices.³

- ¹ ‘How will the war in Ukraine affect the world’s food supply?’ The Economist, March 16, 2022 <https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2022/03/16/how-will-the-war-in-ukraine-affect-the-worlds-food-supply>
- ² ‘How will the war in Ukraine affect the world’s food supply?’ *The Economist*, March 16, 2022 <https://www.economist.com/podcasts/2022/03/16/how-will-the-war-in-ukraine-affect-the-worlds-food-supply>
- ³ ‘Ukraine war: World Bank warns of ‘human catastrophe’ food crisis’, BBC, April 21, 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61171529>

The State of Global Food Security Issues: Has the Conflict Deepened the Challenges?

Prior to the conflict, with fuel prices being at a seven-year high, 36 countries were already facing a 15% food inflation, creating a high risk for debt distress for 60% of the low-income countries.⁴ These countries rely on an extremely concentrated food market supply and reserves, with seven countries making up for 86% of wheat exports. The contribution of Russia and Ukraine in the global food market for wheat and barley export was 30%, which derailed with the advent of the crisis, as Russia suspended all grain exports until August 2022 along with blocking the Black seaports.⁵ Moreover, with the damage caused to Ukrainian infrastructure, land and agricultural machinery, experts say that it can cause a wheat shortage for the next three seasons causing an upward pressure on the demand for alternative resources and an increase in commodity and fertiliser prices.⁶

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has projected acute hunger to increase by 17%, from 276 million people to 323 million people, due to the conflict, which has also raised the emergency food assistance cost by \$23 billion per month, creating potential limitations in implementing life-saving programmes. This will also increase malnutrition, particularly in women and children, as inaccessibility to nutrition, and increase in prices causes shifts in consumption from relatively expensive high nutrition foods to inexpensive, lower nutrition foods, resulting in a long-term impact on human and economic growth.⁷

The Case of Pakistan

For Pakistan, the situation is anticipated to be worse against the backdrop of the Ukraine-Russian conflict due to disruption of food supply chain, since Ukraine has been the main wheat supplier to Pakistan, exporting around 1.2 megaton of wheat, along with Russia also supplying 0.92 megatonne wheat to Pakistan for the period 2020-2021.⁸ Pakistan's food import bill during the same period was 16% of the total import bill, which has increased to over 20% in the face of the conflict. Ukraine is a large exporter of cooking oil as well as cereals such as maize and wheat. Russia also exports vast amounts of grains as well as fertiliser. The lack of these exports has caused the price of alternatives

4 The Ukraine War is Deepening the Global Food Insecurity - What Can be Done?, United States Institute of Peace, May 16, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/ukraine-war-deepening-global-food-insecurity-what-can-be-done>

5 "War Threatens Ukraine's Place in Global Food Security, Dawn, June 16, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1695083/war-threatens-ukraines-place-in-global-food-security>

6 "Repercussions of Ukraine Conflict", The Express Tribune, March 21, 2022 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2348912/repercussions-of-ukraine-conflict>

7 "The Impact of Russian Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa", Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 18, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>

8 "Ukraine, Russia war: Implications for Pakistan", The Express Tribune, July 05, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2364775/ukraine-russia-war-implications-for-pakistan>

to soar. Record rises in food prices would push hundreds of millions of people into poverty and lower nutrition, if the crisis continues.

It is unfortunate that being an agricultural country Pakistan has started importing edible commodities including wheat, sugar, and lentils. Pakistan's wheat harvest this year has been 26.9million tonnes, against the annual demand of 30.8million tonnes due to high temperature, shortage in water supply and increase in the price of fertilisers. This has left Pakistan with a supply gap of 3 million tonnes for which it has approved 2 million tonnes of duty and tax-free wheat imports from Russia, along with accepting open international tenders for import of 500,000 tonnes of wheat.⁹

Also, an unexpected, early heatwave in mid-March shrunk wheat grains, while poor application of fertiliser (both DAP and urea), either due to unavailability or higher costs, as well as a severe shortage of water have also affected the crop production. As a result, the harvest is expected to be over 2m tonnes less than last year, when an all-time bumper crop had resulted in a wheat output of 28.7m tonnes.¹⁰ Pakistan recorded its warmest March for at least the past 60 years, with several stations breaking March records which severely affected the wheat and mangoes yield. In the pre-monsoon period, Pakistan regularly experiences excessively high temperatures, especially during May resulting in lower yield of wheat. Unexpected pattern of rains and devastated floods destroys the agriculture products in Balochistan. The climate summaries released by Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) over the past two months indicate dangerous trends that may lead to serious shortages of water and food commodities in the country and cause a further spike in inflation.¹¹

With no response from Russia regarding wheat supply to Pakistan on a government-to-government (G2G) basis, Islamabad decided to accept 500,000 tonnes of open international tenders for import of major staple commodities at a much lower rate than earlier. Moscow had been requested for wheat trade more than a month ago and then followed up, but no response had been received as of now.¹²

⁹ "Wheat Imports, Dawn, May 30, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692239/wheat-imports>

¹⁰ Amjad Mahmood, SITUATIONER: Wheat shortages threaten to turn into full-blown crisis, *Dawn News*, May 24, 2022
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1691226>

¹¹ Mir Sher Baz Khetran & Mian Naeem Salik, 'Rising Heat Waves and Climate Change: A Wake Up Call For Pakistan' Issue Brief, *Institute of strategic studies, Islamabad*, May 23, 2022
https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IB_Khetran_and_Salik_May_23_2022.pdf

¹² Khaleeq Kiani, 'ECC accepts tenders for wheat import, Dawn, 'Dawn, July 06, 2022
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1698459/ecc-accepts-tenders-for-wheat-import>

Conclusion

While economic challenges created in the wake of the Covid pandemic, climate change and rapid growth of population have added to the difficulties to address the food security challenges around the globe, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has further deepened the challenges and has deepened food insecurity in countries like Pakistan. In order to avoid such situations in future, Pakistan needs to plan its wheat crops and wheat trade better.