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South Africa remains in grip of drought

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Scorched maize field. Picture: Wikimedia.

South Africa remains in the grip of a drought that is not expected to ease soon, a government task team said on Thursday, putting pressure on inflation as the cost of staple foods soars.

The long-range forecast showed below normal rainfall expected and "therefore little relief is anticipated in the coming months," local government minister Des van Rooyen, chairman of an inter-ministerial task team on drought, told a media briefing in Cape Town.

Van Rooyen, flanked by Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokonyane and Agriculture Minister Senzeni Zokwana, said there was no need to declare a national disaster even as the national planting area for maize declined by 30 percent.

The drought has also reduced the national cattle herd by 15 percent with no relief in sight.

"About 370 large commercial farmers around the country... were at risk of going under due to them not being able to service their debts as a result of the drought," he said.

The cost of staple foods, such as maize, has sky rocketed and had a knock-on effect on inflation, the central bank has said. Inflation is running at 6 percent.

Dam levels have fallen to 53 percent as an El Nino weather pattern, which ended in May, triggered drought conditions across southern Africa and placing millions at risk of food shortages.

Large swathes of scorched land decimated the maize crop, with current forecasts pointing to a 26.6 percent lower harvest this year. Temperatures soared to historic peaks in 2015, the driest year since records started in 1904.

Van Rooyen said water restrictions had been imposed in some provinces. Residents and businesses in the economic hub of Johannesburg are being urged to conserve water usage.

(Reporting by Wendell Roelf; Editing by James Macharia)

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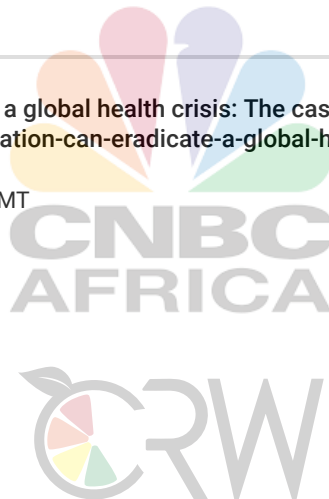
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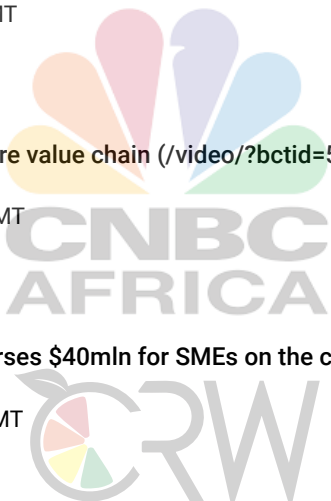
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