Iraq COVID-19 Food Security Monitor
Weekly Update - Issue 7
2 June 2020

I. Key Messages

- The Civil Defense Directorate reported 207 fires, with 2,140 ha of cropland burned and 34,579 ha rescued between April 21st and May 29, 2020.
- Basrah heavy oil prices rose from $21.48 USD per barrel in April to $37.44 USD per barrel on June 1st, an increase of 67%; however, this is still 37% lower than the price a year ago.
- MoLSA allocated about $328 million USD to this year’s third round of regular social protection assistance, which will reach 1.3 million pre-registered households.

II. Overview

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to affect the world, including Iraq. As of May 30, 2020, the World Health Organization reported 5,873 cases in Iraq, with 185 deaths. Compared to last week, the number of COVID-19 cases in Iraq increased 171% while the global caseload increased 6%. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Bank continue to track the impact of the crisis on food security, with a focus on food availability, access, utilization and stability.

III. Food Supply: Production (primarily on farm)

Production. As announced previously, the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) imposed a ban on the import of 23 agricultural goods due to sufficient domestic production for certain products, including oranges, corn, tomatoes, garlic and onions. The Supreme Committee for Health and National Safety also banned the import of watermelon, melon and green broad beans due ample local production. Ninewah Governorate has had an above average potato harvest and Karbala Governorate’s watermelon harvest is higher than average with daily production exceeding one thousand tons.

Domestic production is also a priority for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG plans to increase greenhouse projects to meet the local need for vegetables and fruits across the seasons, with the possibility of exporting the surplus. The interest in boosting domestic production aligns with the previous announcement to increase tariffs on agricultural imports.

The Veterinary Directorate continues to do routine monitoring for bird flu (H5N1) nationwide after the outbreak in Ninewah Governorate last month. In Wasit, Veterinary Hospital staff are monitoring poultry farms in an effort to safeguard the governorate’s production — approximately 3 million chickens produce roughly 51 million eggs monthly.

Other Challenges. From April 21, 2020 to May 29, 2020, the Civil Defense Directorate reported 207 fires, with 2,140 ha of cropland burned and 34,579 ha rescued. The cause of field fires vary, but include power cord failure (68 fires), spark from a harvester (30), cigarettes (20) and terrorist acts (10), among others. Additionally, wheat field fires have affected 250 ha in Erbil Governorate. In comparison to the same time period last year, the number of fires have decreased by approximately 17% and hectares burned decreased by roughly 73%.

Dubas bug, Humara pest (Lesser Date Moth), Red Palm Weevil and dust mites continue to affect date palm production. First, Dubas bug infestations have occurred in Karbala (3,500 hectares), Najaf (500 ha), Babel (750 ha), Wasit (1,750 ha), Baghdad (750 ha) and Diyala (2,250 ha). Three types of control

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operations are underway, including aerial or land spraying and trunk injections. Aerial spraying campaigns are not conducted at full capacity as fewer helicopters have been made available this year compared to previous years. Overall, the control operations have covered 50% of the affected areas in the aforementioned governorates and the pesticides have achieved a 80-85% mortality rate. Second, Al Humara pest, a common pest throughout Iraq that is normally prevalent in this season, has infected 1,050 ha across the country (roughly 1.47 million date palms), excluding Kirkuk, Ninewah, Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Dohuk. Third, dust mites have also begun affect date orchards across the country. This pest affects the fruit in the later, ripening stage – thus, control operations will occur in June to July, starting in the south and moving to the center and northwest regions. Finally, the Red Palm Weevil populations were reported in Safwan sub-district in Basrah governorate, but pheromone traps appear to be effectively stemmed the infestation and no new cases have been reported.

Desert Locust populations remained concentrated in small pockets of the desert, but due to the locusts’ inability to survive extended periods of high temperature and aridity, the Directorate of Plant Protection considers the population naturally controlled. Control campaigns in cultivated areas ceased, but monitoring continued. The Directorate of Plant Protection has already begun developing plans to respond to future infestations. The Sunn pest outbreak is also under control, with only minimal control required in the past few weeks.

IV. Food Supply: Markets (farm gate to markets)

Markets. Basrah heavy oil prices rose from $21.48 USD per barrel in April to $37.44 USD per barrel on June 1st, an increase of 67%. Despite this improvement, prices are still depressed; last year, Basrah heavy oil prices were $59.88 USD per barrel on June 4, 2019.7

Food Reserves. On May 31st, the Ministry of Trade announced that it had only 190,000 tons of rice available in its silos for the Public Distribution System (PDS), the country’s food safety net programme. The country needs around 1.1-1.25 million tons of rice each year for the PDS.

V. Food Demand (markets to consumers)

Prices. Overall, the price of basic commodities did not experience major changes; however, certain commodities have experienced location-specific price fluctuations in the last two weeks. The average price of vegetable oil nationwide decreased by 3% compared to last week (1,403 to 1,361 IQD per liter), but in Muthanna, Thi-Qar, Duhok and Salah Al-din shared that price reduced 17%. On the other hand, vegetable oil prices increased 20% in Qadisiya (1,250 to 1,500 IQD per liter).

Consumption Patterns. Food consumption patterns improved during the last week of Ramadan and Eid. Poor people were able to access more diversified and high quality food due to religious charity, known as zakat. Approximately 5% of surveyed households had insufficient consumption, while 10% of households used negative coping strategies.

VI. Food Supply Chain for Vulnerable Populations

Ongoing Response. In an official statement, the Ministry of Trade stated that the lack of financial allocations was challenging the Ministry’s ability to procure PDS goods consistently, including the four basic PDS items approved in the General Budget Law passed in 2019. Nevertheless, the MoT prepared to distribute flour and rice from the reserve, with product imported or procured locally. Sugar and oil distributions have been postponed until the funds have been received.

The Ministry of Planning (MoP) and Ministry of Social and Labour Affairs (MoLSA) continued their COVID-19 response. MoLSA continued to distribute one-time cash assistance under the Minha programme. MoLSA approved a total of 11,583,731 people, a majority of the 13 million people who applied nationwide. In Kurdistan, MoLSA distributed 178,000 food baskets to vulnerable households against the planned 200,000 baskets in Erbil (70,000), Sulaimaniyah (58,000) and Dohuk (50,000) in the past few weeks. The remaining 22,000 food baskets continue to be distributed. Approximately 88,000 households who received a food basket were already registered recipients of social safety net programmes.8

MoLSA announced that they have allocated about $328 million USD to this year’s third round of regular social protection assistance, an increase compared to the previous round. The assistance will be distributed to roughly 1.3 million pre-registered households, reaching about 6.5 million people.

UN/NGO Response. In May 2020, WFP and partners increased assistance to 26,000 more vulnerable refugees, increasing the overall assistance from 40% to 70% of refugees residing in official camps in Dohuk, Sulaimaniyah and Erbil governorates. WFP and partners continued to assist 269,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in camps, reaching an additional 2,000 vulnerable new arrivals and returnees in collaboration with Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD). WFP “topped up” the government food assistance for 90% of the camp population by providing a 11,000 IQD cash transfers per person. For households not receiving government support, WFP provided a full ration of 17,000 IQD per person. This coordination will continue in June; MoMD confirmed distributions in Duhok and Erbil governorates, while distributions in other locations are still in the planning stages.

The University of Al-Qadisiyah Agriculture College, in cooperation with MoA and FAO, hosted an online, two day conference about research to improve animal and plant production.