

Drought-prone Eritrea may need outside aid-UN envoy

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ASMARA, June 22 (Reuters) - Eritrea may require foreign assistance if rains fail this year in the drought-prone country, which had slashed food aid in a drive for self-reliance, a senior U.N. aid official said on Friday.

The United Nations estimated that two-thirds of Eritreans needed aid in 2005.

But in the same year, Eritrea cut distribution of free food by more than 94 percent -- from 1.3 million people to 72,000 -- as part of its drive to become self-reliant.

It argued that foreign powers have sometimes exploited food relief for political gain.

"If there is lack of rain, especially in the main rainy season, they will still be in need of assistance from the outside," said the U.N. Secretary General's Special Humanitarian Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Kjell Magne Bondevik.

As part of its self-reliance strategy, Eritrea started a cash-for-work programme, under which Eritreans would receive cash for doing work, enabling them to buy food for themselves.

"On a personal note, I'm both concerned about the future from a political perspective and a humanitarian one," Bondevik told reporters in the Eritrean capital Asmara.

"It's not enough that people have cash, but they need food available in the markets," he added.

Eritrea has only produced an average 30 percent of its cereal needs in the last nine years, although the figure has varied between 8 and 70 percent each year according to U.N. data.

The Red Sea state says it plans to increase irrigation, build dams and fisheries to bolster food supplies. "Although the various programmes we have implemented so far have not ensured 100 percent food security, it has nonetheless reached an irreversible stage and thus can be dubbed successful," President Isaias Afwerki said in a speech in May.