

UN statistics reveal extent of world hunger

By Nicole Coia
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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- In his 2009 Lenten message Pope Benedict XVI said the spiritual practice of fasting also should lead to concrete action on behalf of the hungry.

"Fasting is an aid to open our eyes to the situation in which so many of our brothers and sisters live," the pope said in the message released at the Vatican Feb. 3.

The Vatican invited Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Program, to its press conference presenting the message.

The following are statistics on world hunger from the World Food Program and the Office of the U.N. Secretary-General:

-- In 2008, the number of undernourished people in the world rose to 963 million (more than the combined populations of the United States, Canada and the European Union), up 40 million from 2007.

-- The majority of undernourished people live in developing countries, with about 65 percent of the total living in India, China, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia.

-- Hunger and malnutrition are the No. 1 risk to health worldwide, greater than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined.

-- Hunger does not affect just the individual. Economists estimate that every child whose physical and mental development is stunted by hunger and malnutrition stands to lose 5 percent to 10 percent in lifetime earnings.

-- The total food surplus of the United States alone could satisfy every empty stomach in Africa; France's leftovers could feed the hungry in Democratic Republic of Congo and Italy's could feed Ethiopia's undernourished.

-- Today 25,000 people will die from hunger. A child dies every six seconds of malnutrition or starvation.

-- A number of factors, including high energy and fertilizer costs, sent global food prices soaring to all-time highs in 2008. In March the price of rice hit a 19-year high while wheat climbed to its highest level in 28 years. However the price of staple foods throughout the world has declined over the last few months.

-- Food riots erupted in the spring of 2008 in Haiti, Mexico and Senegal. The World Bank estimated that social unrest, as a consequence of the world food crisis, could spread to 33 countries. Although riots have eased in recent months, at a meeting in Madrid, Spain, Jan. 26, Ban Ki-moon, U.N. secretary-general, urged wealthy nations not to ignore the shocking problem of world hunger.

-- There is enough food in the world today for everyone to have the nourishment necessary for a healthy and productive life.