Climate change zambia

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This page presents Zambia"s climate context for the current climatology, 1991 ...

Historically, Zambia is frequently inundated with seasonal floods and flash floods, ...

CHONGWE, Zambia--Benson Chipungu sits in a leather armchair and reaches for the remote to switch off the news. Pieces of fabric hang over the windows, darkening the room against the heat. A gas-powered hand-plough is parked in the corner. On the floors behind his chair, dozens of ears of corn are spread out, a display of the paltry crop the 56-year-old farmer managed to salvage from his rain-starved soil.

Everyone here, in this country of nearly 20 million people, is nervously doing the same thing. It"s too late for the rain.

Corn, or maize as most people here call it, is the lifeblood of the country"s diet, eaten for breakfast, lunch and dinner in the form of "nshima," a high calorie, polenta-like porridge made from ground corn known as mealie meal. Unless they"ve had nshima, most Zambians feel like they haven"t eaten.

The corn processed into mealie meal depends on a rainy season that begins around planting time in November or December and ends in March or April, with the harvest. But this year very little rain has fallen and unusual heat has stressed the crop even more. Even if it rains now, farmers will harvest a fraction of their normal crop. The country expects a 50 to 60 percent reduction in yields.

At the end of February, facing a hunger crisis, Zambia"s president made the politically difficult move of declaring a national emergency--the first in 40 years. Worsening matters, the water levels on the Zambezi River are so low that turbines at the massive Kariba Dam, the country"s primary source of power, could sputter and stop. Ten days after the emergency declaration, the government imposed "load shedding" measures that requires every customer in the country to go without power for eight hours every day for the next two months. Normally these measures aren"t implemented until the end of the dry season in October.

In recent decades a boom in mining and agriculture led the World Bank to reclassify Zambia from a "least developed country" to a "middle income country." Its capital, Lusaka, has sprouted new office towers, shopping malls, hospitals and a growing professional class--all the signs of an upward economy, of the kind the global North has experienced for a century, abetted by fossil fuels. But the COVID crisis knocked the country off course and it became the first African country to default on its sovereign debt.

Rain grows its food and powers its energy grid; rain keeps the lights on and the fans blowing in supermarkets, barber shops and roadside restaurants. Rain cranks operations at Zambia"s lucrative copper and cobalt mines, essential not just for Zambia"s economy, but the global energy transition.

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A country"s food insecurity is usually the result of complex, intertwined factors--bad weather, economic problems, war or conflict--that complicate the process of attributing food shortages or malnutrition to climate change. But in Zambia, right now, the link between hunger and climate change is unusually stark.

Warming waters off the African continent"s coast, heated by the burning of fossil fuels, are accelerating atmospheric changes here and supercharging the weather phenomenon known as El Ni?o. It"s hot and dry here--and will get hotter and drier in some areas, and wetter and more flood-prone in others. For a country that depends almost entirely on rain, the lack or over-abundance of it means big trouble. This atmospheric see-saw will test the country"s infrastructure, notably the beleaguered Kariba Dam and the reservoir it holds back, the largest in the world.

None of this is the fault of the people who live here, but they"re the ones left to cope with the vagaries of their once-reliable rainfall. Historical per-capita greenhouse gas emissions here, as in most African countries, are relatively tiny. The Zambian government, like those in many other developing countries, is calling for help.