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AFRICA/MADAGASCAR - Food insecurity opens the door to tuberculosis

Toliara (Agenzia Fides) - Malnutrition and tuberculosis (TB) are closely linked: the first weakens the immune system, increasing the vulnerability to the disease, while TB reduces appetite, worsens the absorption of micronutrients and alters the metabolism of patients. Currently, health experts are concerned that the interruption in the distribution of food aid in Madagascar is contributing to the increase in TB cases in Toliara, capital of the province and the region of Atsimo-Andrefana, on the southwest coast of Madagascar. Following the coup of 2009, donors have suspended all kinds of assistance to the African country, and the scarcity of funds has decreased considerably food assistance. Furthermore, the impact of the cyclone Haruna, which hit the country in the month of February 2013, has compounded the problem, the chain of distribution was intermittent and cases of TB are increasing. To make the situation worse are the erratic rains and a recent locust plague that ravaged half of the country. It is feared that out of 20 million inhabitants about 13 million will be at risk of food insecurity in 2013-14. According to estimates by the National Program for Control of TB in Madagascar in 2012 there were 26.182 confirmed cases, although the total number of infections is thought to be about 50,000, 5% of them fatal. The experts at the service center for TB stated that in Toliara, in the first four months of 2012, 56 new cases were recorded, compared to 68 in the same period this year. At the Toliara center, in the wake of the cyclone Haruna, food supplies had finished in February of 2013. People need to work in order to eat and are often forced to stop the therapy. About 23 thousand people, sick and their families receive food from the program Food by Prescription (FBP) of WFP, however, the program has been temporarily suspended in 22 of the 51 health centers due to lack of funds. Over three-quarters of the Malagasy population lives on less than U.S. $ 1 a day. Moreover, 80% of the population is rural, and 65% live in 10km or more away from the health center. (AP) (Agenzia Fides 02/05/2013)

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