EGYPT: Farming beyond borders

23/12/2010

Short of cultivable land, farmers head for other African countries

Short of land to produce food in the volumes it needs for its population, Egypt is turning to cultivation in other countries.

Egypt's fast growing population of 80 million people needs about 14 million tons of wheat a year but it produces only about 60% of that amount. A ban on wheat exports by Russia, once a major supplier, has aggravated the problem. The shortfall is pushing up prices which in recent months has put pressure on the system of subsidies the government provides to try and avert social unrest.

Agriculture Minister Amin Abaza says Egypt needs to cultivate 2.1 million hectares to produce sufficient wheat to meet demand, about two-thirds more than the 1.26 million hectares it cultivates now, IRIN reports. To bridge the gap it is turning to cultivation in countries with a surplus of irrigated land.

To start the process, Egypt has reached agreement with Sudan to allow cereal farming by Egyptian companies on 420,000 hectares of the well-irrigated Al-Gezira region south of Khartoum. The Egyptian government will have no role beyond providing technical assistance, Saad Nasser, an adviser to the agriculture minister said.

Egyptian officials are now interested in exploring opportunities to invest in agriculture in other African and Nile-basin countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, according to IRIN. Such investment could both strengthen ties with these countries and open up opportunities to address a problem of water shortages, the officials said.

A leading Egyptian agricultural expert, Abdel Salam Gomaa, said water shortages are the biggest obstacle to Egypt achieving food self-sufficiency. But he also warned against depending on the generosity of other Nile-basin countries, some of which say existing agreements for sharing the Nile's waters dating back to colonial times give too much to Egypt and Sudan.

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