

*Rich drive SUVs, poor go hungry: food prices soar as crops burned to fuel the West. The Nova Scotian, Sunday Herald. 2008 April 13*

*Freetown, Sierra Leone. I once asked a friend in Ghana how on earth West Africans get by on so little. She smiled and said, "Well, I think we're magicians at making ends meet, at managing our little bit of money". The average person in West Africa may have a dollar a day — or much less — to try to cover costs of food, schooling for the children, housing, and very basic health care. Until now, as inconceivable as it is to me, they have managed more or less to make do, patiently enduring the hardship. For years they have watched quietly as their natural resources — oil, timber, gold, diamonds — are exploited and shipped off to foreign lands, with nothing positive to show for it at home.*

*It takes an awful lot to make Africans angry enough that they will take to the streets and risk brutal suppression by trigger-happy security forces. But when you're already carefully measuring out small daily rations of maize or rice or palm oil to feed the family and suddenly the prices for basic foodstuffs — corn, wheat, rice, palm oil — spiral skywards, the effects are devastating. Children may no longer be able to attend school, and the whole family may be reduced to one extremely simple meal a day — or less. And hunger breeds anger. In recent weeks people have taken to the streets in the African countries of Cameroon, Egypt, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, to protest sky-rocketing food prices and the cost of living. Their demonstrations have resulted in mass arrests and in Cameroon as many as 40 demonstrators were killed. Strangely enough, the whole world seemed to be watching and condemning when Chinese forces brutally suppressed human rights demonstrations in Tibet, but seems not to notice the new unrest in Africa and the reasons for it.*

*The reasons are escalating food prices. In the past year world prices for many basic foodstuffs have doubled. In the past few months, the prices have abruptly risen even more. Some blame the spiralling prices on increasing demand in increasingly affluent Asian countries, damage to crops by natural disasters, climate change and shortages of arable land around the world. But according to others, including the World Food Program and International Monetary Fund (IMF), the most immediate*

*and obvious cause of the dramatic recent jumps in prices is the growing demand for biofuels — making fuel from food in wealthy, industrialized parts of the world.*

*This is really bad news for the urban poor in places like Africa. The use of biofuels puts the world's one billion hungry people in competition with the world's one billion motorists, and it's not a very fair competition. Each time someone pumps fuel made from food crops into their vehicle in the wealthy world, they are helping to drive up prices for that food around the world, where people still depend on those calories for survival — not to idle a vehicle while awaiting a coffee in a drive-thru or to take a pleasurable trip in the SUV for a weekend getaway. Precious few people in West Africa own so much as a bicycle, let alone a motorized vehicle. To make matters worse, governments in the wealthy world are heavily subsidizing the production of biofuels. The US has been subsidizing the production of ethanol from corn, for example, and imposing high tariffs on imported Brazilian ethanol made from sugar. African governments are not permitted to subsidize their farmers or fix prices because of strict IMF and World Bank policies imposed on them.*

*One United Nations expert on the right to food, Jan Ziegler, says that it is a “crime against humanity” to divert arable land to the production of crops that are then burned for fuel. He called for a five-year ban on the practice. This would allow time for technological research to refine ways of producing biofuels from crop waste — corn cobs and banana leaves for example — rather than from the actual food crops. The chief environmental scientist in the United Kingdom has also called for a delay to the policy that demands the inclusion of biofuels at pumps across the UK, which is driving up food prices. There is growing doubt about the environmental benefits of biofuels made from food crops. Huge swaths of tropical forests have come down to clear the land for biofuel crops such as oil palm in Indonesia and Malaysia, and burning of peatland there has sent huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. A European Commission report leaked to the press in January showed that biofuels made from food crops may actually contribute to climate change. As the IMF says, to produce and transport ethanol made from corn requires the use of an equivalent amount of gasoline.*

*So why the mad — possibly insane — rush to biofuels? If the true purpose is to slow climate change, then maybe a far better idea would be to change the way the wealthy world uses — and wastes — energy, with every flip of a switch or the turn of a key in our dashboards. Africa, which has done so little to contribute to climate change, is already feeling its devastating effects in shrinking water supplies and spreading deserts. And now, to pile injury on injury, people in Africa are also bearing the brunt of the escalating prices of food. The result is hunger, anger and more suffering in this part of the world that has already suffered more than enough.*