

Guest opinion: What food riot abroad drove home

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I recently traveled with a group representing the World Soy Foundation to the East African country of Mozambique, where we planned to visit rural schools that offer soy foods to counter protein deficiency among children. Instead, we were holed up in our motel on Sept. 1 as the sight of smoke and smell of burning tires pierced the air. That's not comforting for an Iowa farmer 10,000 miles away from the security of his Midwestern home.

More than 20 people died in food riots on the streets of Mozambique's capital, Maputo, after the price of bread went up 25 percent. Our way out came in the form of a reluctant taxi driver tailing army trucks as they secured roads to the airport.

Now that I am back, I realize that, in Mozambique's case, the higher prices were set by the government based on monetary exchange issues, rather than concerns about supplies. Those increases had a dramatic effect in a country where more than half the people live in poverty. Mozambique ranks 175th of 179 countries on the U.N. Human Development Index, which takes into account health and education levels as well as income.

We aren't the only ones contemplating the need to stop hunger and poverty. On Sept. 20-22, about 140 heads of state met in New York to look at 2015 targets to achieve Millennium Development Goals. The first of eight goals is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The target that world leaders set in 1996 was to cut in half the number of hungry people by 2015. Achieving that goal will mean cutting the number of hungry by more than 500 million in the next five years.

The United Nations estimate of people who will suffer chronic hunger this year is 925 million - down 98 million from 1.023 billion in 2009. Leaders of the 2010 Summit say the New York event will be successful if it generates a renewed political commitment to achieve the goals and leads to a global action agenda to accelerate progress.

In Iowa, the World Food Prize is gearing up for its annual events in October. Dr. Norman Borlaug's inspirational words remain a powerful reminder. "You can't build a peaceful world on empty stomachs and human misery."

What can we as Midwesterners do in a world that seems so overwhelmed with hunger and poverty? Finding our way out of a rioting city was simple compared to finding the way out of poverty, hunger and hopelessness for nearly a billion people.

A child dies every six seconds because of lack of proper nutrition. That's a particularly harsh statistic when compared to Iowa's rich harvest. A single acre of our soybeans provides about 18,000 rations of soy protein that can make an enormous difference in children's ability to grow and become productive members of society.

My trip to Africa led to discussing these opportunities and obstacles with philanthropist and farmer Howard G. Buffett. I recommend his book, "FRAGILE The Human Condition," and encourage fellow Iowans to hear him speak at the upcoming World Food Prize in Des Moines. Buffett has photographed the face of humanity and hunger. He states, "The purpose of the book is to share experiences in the hope that knowledge and awareness will lead to change."

My trip to Mozambique made me more sure than ever that the World Soy Foundation's humanitarian work is part of the solution. Finding the way out of a food riot was life changing for me. Now's the time to help others change their lives for good, starting with a healthy diet.