



IN THE LAND WHERE LIFE IS ON HOLD

Africa is on the front line of climate change reports John Vidal. And floods, drought and famine show the continent is in for a rough ride

Thirty men and 22 women sit beneath a great mugamba tree on the edge of Chikani village in southern Zambia. "This is what happened," says Julius Njame, standing and speaking formally. "We prepared our fields for planting seeds in the November rains. We waited but the first drop didn't fall till December 20. After a day, the rains stopped. Three weeks later, it started to rain again. But then it stopped again after a few days. Since then, we have had no rain."

The crowd murmurs its assent and one by one, people stand to tell how their own crops wilted and how little they have harvested this year. Anderson says he got five bags of the staple maize crop, Lovewell eight, Jennifer two, Felice three and Jonah seven. Some say they have lost almost everything and will be eating wild foods within weeks. Most say they will be able to hang on only until next month.

The people of Chikani are

experiencing a climatic phenomenon taking place around the world. But the effect of global warming on a village of central African subsistence farmers is different and far more serious than on America or Europe.

Some northerners bask in the idea that global warming promises delightful summers and longer growing seasons. But rising sea levels and future climatic extremes, causing even a small change in rainfall patterns or temperatures, is perilous now for vast areas of Africa.

Where the rich northern city or farmer can adapt, the families of millions of poor Zambian, Congolese or Malawian farmers go hungry for months; urban water supplies are interrupted and wells run dry.

Africa is in the frontline of climate change, and for the people of Chikani it makes the difference between food and hunger, migration and stability, sufficiency and destitution - even life and death.

Droughts, floods, unseasonal rains,

extreme weather and natural disasters have long been common in southern Africa, but new studies are finding a pattern of increasing climatic variability and unpredictability. According to UN agencies and national meteorologists, severe dry and wet periods have become more frequent in the past two to three decades.

Old Jonah in Chikani, who has 24 children from three wives, doesn't need academics to tell him the climate is changing. "These are the worst rains ever," he says. "The pattern of rainfall is definitely changing. I remember many bad years but this is the first time the river Musaya has ever dried up. This is the first time that we have only had one place to find water."

Crop failure this year extends across swathes of southern Zambia, northern Zimbabwe and Malawi. According to the UN's food organisation, 20 countries in Africa are this month facing food emergencies following droughts or "adverse" weather.