

El Niño Scorches Southern Africa With Driest February on Record

By Bloomberg

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Dried earth in the Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe.

(Bloomberg) -- A swathe of southern Africa suffered the driest February in decades that wiped out crops, precipitated power shortages and threatened to send already high food prices surging further.

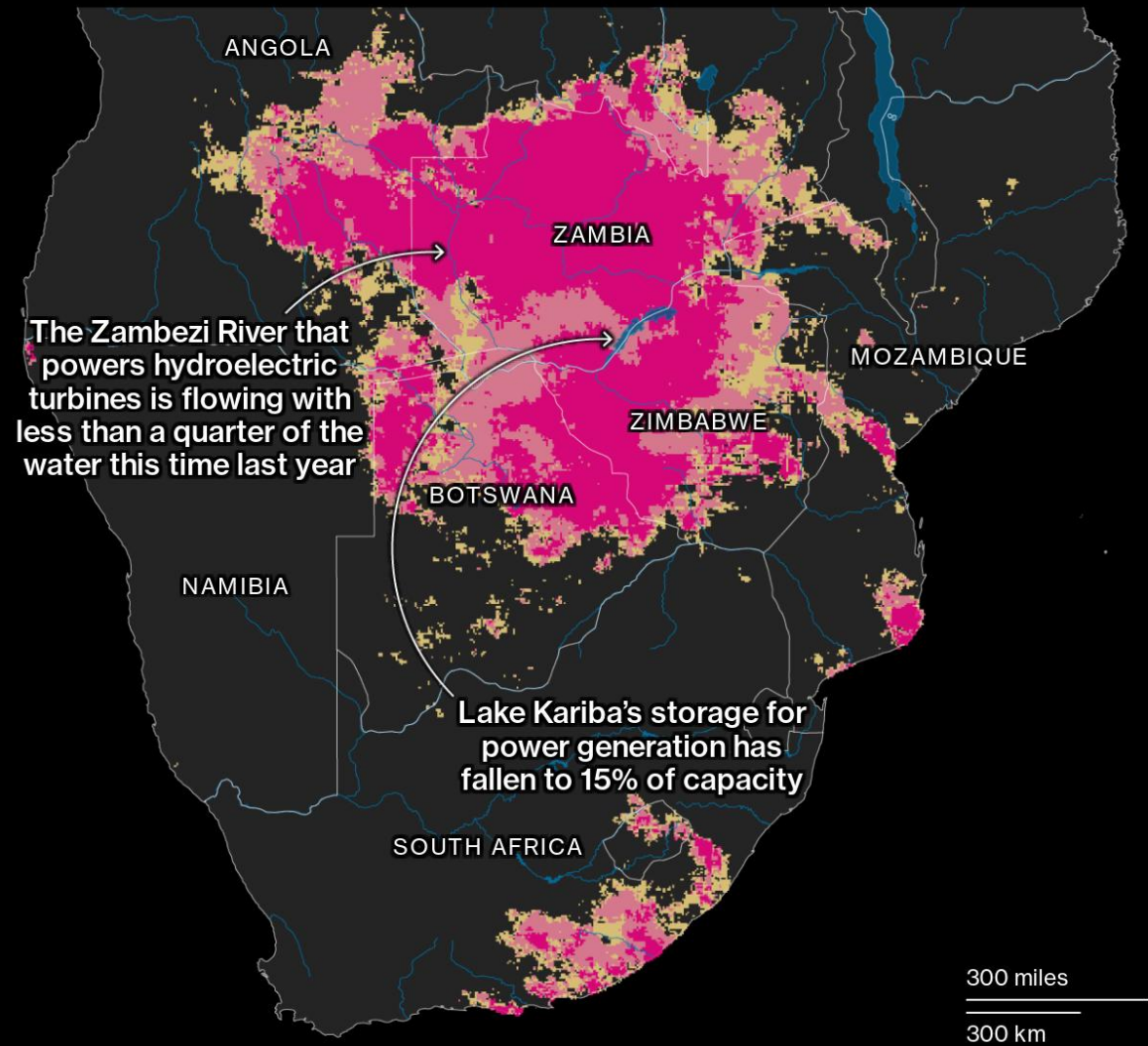
Last month, large parts of Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe had the least rainfall — or close to it — since records began in 1981, early data from the University of California Santa Barbara's Climate Hazards Center show. The center based its preliminary appraisal mainly on satellite-based rainfall estimates, with a final assessment due next week that will include more rainfall gauge observations.

The dry spell, blamed on the El Niño weather phenomenon, is the latest indicator of how severely Africa is being impacted by extreme weather events that scientists say are becoming increasingly frequent and severe because of climate change — even though it produces far less global-warming gases than developed regions.

Parts of Southern Africa Have Had the Driest February on Record

Preliminary satellite data shows El Niño's severe impact

■ Driest on record ■ Second-driest ■ Third-driest



Source: UC Santa Barbara Climate Hazards Center
Note: Preliminary data from Feb. 1-28; records started in 1981.

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Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema last week declared the drought a national disaster — an estimated 45% of planted areas have been destroyed just as the staple corn crop should be maturing. In Zimbabwe, some farmers have given up trying to grow and harvest their crops, allowing cattle to graze on what's left. Water flows in the Zambezi River, which powers turbines that both nations rely on for electricity, are less than a quarter of what they were a year ago.



Hakainde Hichilema Photographer: *Krisztian Bocsi/Bloomberg*

“This drought has devastating consequences,” Hichilema said in a national address. “The destruction caused by the prolonged drought spell is immense.”

The cost of corn in Zambia surged an average 76% in February from a year ago. In neighboring Zimbabwe, US dollar prices for the cereal have shown a similar increase since December alone, according to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network. In some areas, prices doubled within three months.

Zimbabwe’s government has warned that the 2024 harvest may be half of last year’s. The local grain millers association plans to import as much as 1.1 million tons of corn from neighboring South Africa and South America over the next year, the state-owned Herald newspaper reported Feb. 28. The World Food Programme anticipates that about a quarter of the rural population will run short of grain in the first quarter.

“Food supply constraints brought on by dry conditions will place upward pressure on inflation in the region in 2024,” said Yvonne Mhango, Africa Economist at Bloomberg Economics. “This will likely mean high rates for longer.”

Large parts of Botswana have also been scorched by El Niño, with the Botswana Meteorological Services noting that the vast majority of the country was receiving significantly less rain than normal. Farmers who receive government support planted less than half the area in the current season than they did in the previous one.

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