

Syria gives financial, food aid to the poor

DAMASCUS, Feb 07, 2011 (AFP) - Syria's national social aid fund will start handing out financial aid to families living below the poverty line next Sunday, the official press reported Monday.

The fund will parcel out a total of 250 million dollars to about 420,000 low-income families over seven days from 170 centres around the country.

On Sunday, the distribution of food aid to families afflicted by drought kicked off in the northeastern city of Deir Ezzor, according to the official daily Al-Thawra.

Drought has gripped Syria for the last five years crippling agricultural production, accelerating a rural exodus out of the parched northeast, and pushing up to three million people into poverty, according to UN estimates.

About 1,083 families have received food aid which included dried beans, rice, burghol (cracked wheat), oil and salt as part of a UN campaign to combat drought launched in 2009.

Syria, which is heading for a market economy, suffers from "considerable challenges," with 14 percent of its 22 million people living in poverty, according to deputy prime minister of economic affairs Abdallah Dardari.

One-fifth of the workforce is meanwhile unemployed.

The Syrian government announced mid-January plans to invest 14 billion dollars in development as part of a five-year plan (2011-2015).