

U.S. locust effort off to a good start

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

The United States has entered its first major battle in the war against the locust in Africa on a scale that promises success. After weeks of discussion, the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) announced Sept. 4 that four DC-7 aircraft arrived in Senegal Aug. 31 and began spraying to kill grasshoppers in the northern region Sept. 4. The effort is of a large enough scale to get the job done in Senegal, where grasshoppers have reached a density of 330 per square yard from the previous disaster level of 200. The grasshoppers have been destroying vegetation and swarming out of Senegal into neighboring countries at plague levels.

This initial U.S. effort, carried out in cooperation with the French, Canadians, and Dutch, is along the lines of the military-style operation needed to stop the locust and grasshopper breeding from exploding out of control continent-wide. Will the campaign be continued on the necessary scale? The next three weeks are critical for spraying across the Sahel area, and the October-November period is critical across southern Africa in order to kill the young locusts before they can reproduce.

So far, the big-plane effort stops in Senegal, and the rest of the African campaign (which totals 1.1 million hectares) is a patchwork of small-plane spraying coordinated by the slow-moving Locust Control Center of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. A further problem is that several areas of infestation—in Chad, Sudan, and Ethiopia—are off-limits for U.S. or U.N. aerial spraying because of ongoing armed conflicts.

An OFDA press release announced that 570,000 pounds of malathion, purchased from American Cyanamid by the Senegal government, would be sprayed over 900,000 acres. The DC-7s are provided under a \$1.2 million contract by the Arizona-based T & G Aviation. At this point, U.S. financial assistance for the locust/grasshopper effort, in the form of equipment, technical assistance, etc., amounts to \$6.4 million.

The DC-7s can do as much, if not more, as the big U.S. Air Force C-130s. They can cover 1,000 miles per sortie, carrying up to 300,000 gallons of pesticide, which is sprayed out of their 660-foot wingspan. They fly at 200 miles per hour at an altitude of 200 feet, going in 60-mile runs over the infested area. "The little planes are like using a fly swatter" compared to the DC-7s, the aviation company said.

OFDA will follow up the DC-7 spraying with on-ground and small-plane efforts to determine the kill rate and to get

Where's peace-loving Moscow now?

Among the long list of donor nations—which includes the Europeans, the OPEC nations, Algeria and Morocco, China, and Japan—"there is one country most apparent by its absence," as one State Department source put it. The Soviet Union as yet hasn't said a word to the FAO about helping with the locust problem. And the FAO dropped its usual circumlocution in such matters to note that the situation with the Soviets [in respect to Ethiopia] was "not too good."

The most urgent areas for useful Soviet intervention are those areas of conflict where locusts are breeding but where Soviet-supported forces will shoot down any U.N. or U.S. planes doing aerial spraying. In Chad, for example, Libya's Qaddafi controls the territory above the 16th latitude; there is fighting in the southern Sudan, which is considered a "no man's land"; and there is fighting in northern Ethiopia and the Ogaden desert area. These are all areas of heavy locust infestation that will quickly spill over into the neighboring areas—locusts don't obey political boundaries. If there is no spraying in Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya will soon be hit by swarms of locusts.

The Soviets reportedly are trying to figure out a "face-saving" solution to the problem. But while the Soviets ponder their empire's image, the choices seem unavoidably straightforward: Either they do the aerial spraying themselves, or collaborate with the U.N. effort.

rid of residual infestation. The DC-7s could stay in Africa to finish the job—if other African nations request the big planes, and if other donor nations agree to help with the bill. In fact, the big planes are both more effective and less costly than hundreds of small planes. The problem, however, is political. According to OFDA sources, the United States "doesn't want to be perceived to be doing it all. Then others can set us up for failure." OFDA is hoping that the success and speed of the Senegal effort will convince both the Africans and Europeans that the big-plane approach is the only one that makes sense, and that the "big bucks," as OFDA put it, will then be forthcoming.

Can the spread of the locusts and grasshoppers still be stopped before it decimates the continent? Yes—if there is a commitment to keep these four DC-7s flying so that they can cover the vast infested territory in the Sahel, East Africa, and later southern Africa, and the small planes are used for back-up efforts, as in Senegal.