

Gorbachov admits food crisis is desperate

by Luba George

The Soviet food crisis will form the agenda of the next Communist Party Central Committee Plenum, which will be held before the end of November. The urgency of this crisis allows no delay until December or January. Moscow's announcement of an upcoming CC plenum on the food and agricultural policy question was made in a typically indirect manner, by a member of the Central Committee, Vyacheslav Kochemasov, the Soviet ambassador to East Germany, when he was interviewed by the East German state radio station on Oct. 25.

In the text of that interview, published the next day by the East German party newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, Kochemasov stated:

"The tasks of agricultural policy in the present phase were clearly formulated in the speech by Mikhail Gorbachov at the recent meeting with agricultural specialists at the Central Committee of the CPSU. That was a lively, interesting discussion with these people on the restructuring of the economic relations on the farms. This will be continued at the upcoming plenum of the party's Central Committee on questions of agricultural policy."

The growing Soviet food crisis is a potential detonator of World War III. If the Russians cannot intimidate the rest of the world into providing them with sufficient food on *their* terms, they could strike out militarily to secure their food supply, perhaps even into Western Europe.

'Everyday life has deteriorated'

The "meeting at the Central Committee" that Kochemasov referred to, held Nov. 2, certainly was "lively," and

underscored the life-and-death urgency of the food crisis.

Senior party ideologue-economist Otto Latsis, in his report to the meeting, presented a bleak picture of the overall food situation adding, "Everyday life has not improved. If anything, it has deteriorated."

Food shortages have worsened considerably in recent weeks. In the Ukraine, eyewitnesses report that such basic foodstuffs as meat, sugar, and dairy products are virtually unavailable. The severe food shortages in the republic were the main subject of discussion at the Oct. 10 CC plenum in the Ukraine, where party boss V.V. Shcherbitsky stressed that "production and expansion of food supplies" was the "root of the problem . . . upon whose solution depends the course and future of the *perestroika*."

In the Ural industrial city of Sverdlovsk, meat consumption stands at 4 kilograms per person per year, and in Central Asia at below 20 kilos. Throughout the country, including now in most districts of Moscow itself, shops are devoid of meat, dairy products, sugar, and sweets.

The language of Gorbachov's speech to those high-level Central Committee functionaries was the most strident to date on the food situation. He emphasized that the food crisis is "the most severe problem" facing the Soviet Union, and that "other tasks," no matter how important, must "if necessary, be put off," to focus on the food shortages, which "must be tackled at whatever cost."

The food crisis is already shaping the next storms to erupt within the Soviet leadership. Gorbachov himself admitted that heads could roll, when he remarked that "without a radical change in the attitudes" of the leadership entrusted

with the agricultural question, no solutions can be found.

Gorbachov warned that the Soviet leadership is becoming "increasingly concerned" over the tendency to twist around agricultural policy decisions, "or even to ignore them."

He was referring to the plan, now ratified by the Soviet parliament, allowing private farmers to *lease* state land for up to 50 years for food production. Under this scheme, where farmers could sell the produce of the leased land, the state hopes to heavily increase food production, through the added income incentive.

Besides Gorbachov's personal intervention, the Soviet media in late October and early November have been replete with coverage focusing on priority tasks being assigned to solve the food crisis.

Item. Oct. 22: *Sovetskaya Rossiya* newspaper reported on a Council of Ministers session in the Russian republic on Oct. 21 "to discuss a question that can leave no inhabitant of Russia indifferent—the question of measures to increase food production and improve the provision of foodstuffs for the population." They talked about "the real possibility" to satisfy needs for dairy products, poultry, vegetable and animal fats, potatoes, vegetables, fish products, margarine, eggs, tea, candy, bread and macaroni. In other words, none of these are being satisfied now.

Item. Nov. 1: The Moscow TV evening news program *Vremya* reported that "for four days, Politburo Comrades [Lev] Zaikov and [Yegor] Ligachov [recently appointed to head the newly established Agriculture Policy Commission] have been studying in detail the work of Moscow's meat and dairy industry," which "on-the-spot analysis" was part of implementing CC and government decisions on strengthening the Soviet Union's industrial base and food processing in particular. They visited dairy and meat-processing combines, met workers and specialists, pushed discipline, democracy, and the role of primary party organizations in both.

Soviets demand West pay food tribute

Shortly before the Nov. 2 crisis meeting, Gorbachov had revealed that procuring food was uppermost in the minds of the Soviet leadership during his talks on Oct. 24-27 with the West German delegation led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl. During the talks, as the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* (Nov. 7) was to write, Gorbachov "talked the most" not to Kohl, but to West German Agriculture Minister Ignaz Kiechle.

At the Moscow discussions, Kiechle got up to introduce himself, and after saying his name, Gorbachov cut him off, and said: "I know, you are Kiechle, the agriculture minister."

Every *fifth* kilo of butter used in the Soviet Union this year has come from French and West German farmers, Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov told a mid-October meeting of the Soviet Council of Ministers. Next year, he said, every *fourth* kilo would come from French and German farmers. West European shipments of food are not limited to butter. The governments of France and West Germany have already

agreed on extended shipments of food products, including canned meat and vegetables.

In preparation for French President François Mitterrand's late-November visit to Moscow, the French and Soviet agriculture ministers met. The French side emerged from the meeting to report that shipments of food from France to the U.S.S.R. will continue to be met promptly. This means that food shipments to the U.S.S.R. will take precedence over European Community needs.

In Soviet-German consultations between the respective ministers of agriculture, according to a source in Bonn, the West German agreement to pay "food tribute" to the Soviets met strong, albeit hypocritical, protest from the side of the United States. Nevertheless, the deal is expected to be finalized in the near future along the lines discussed in Moscow Oct. 24-27 by Ignaz Kiechle.

Meanwhile, on Nov. 4, the French and German ministers of agriculture got together in Bonn and agreed that both countries will ship more food to the Soviet Union, and at preferential prices. Kiechle went so far as to declare that in his view, "the issue of peace is more important, now, than temporary considerations in the framework of the European Community's agricultural policy."

During the Kohl-Gorbachov Moscow talks, Deutsche Bank signed a 3.2 billion mark credit line for the Soviet Foreign Trade Bank, at least half of which will be used for modernizing the Soviet agro-industry sector, increasing the output of an estimated 200 companies in the food-processing industry in the Soviet Union. Deutsche Bank's Alfred Herrhausen does not rule out the possibility that a good part of the credit line might also be used for emergency food purchases by the Soviets in Western Europe. Herrhausen stressed that the supply of consumer goods to the Russian population "means a great deal for the internal stability of Gorbachov."

On Nov. 7 a Soviet delegation arrived in the West German city of Paderborn to discuss food product deliveries to Russia. Envisaged are sausages, canned bacon, and other durable food products which won't rot before reaching Soviet consumers.

Transport bottlenecks

Transport is the big problem in the Soviet Union; at least 25% of food cargos usually rots before it ever reaches the consumer. Sources in the German government are also pointing out that Soviet experts are expected to contact German agro-machinery companies soon, to buy "appropriate machinery" for food processing, storage, packing, and transport, to reduce the notorious loss of a quarter of the Soviet harvest. This also includes silo technology, on which the German government offered support and technical advice.

Such large-scale purchases of food-processing industry equipment have a military-strategic benefit for Moscow: They will enormously increase in the next few years Moscow's capability of building up strategic food stockpiles.