

Food relief requires world mobilization

by Marcia Merry

The state of the world food emergency is highlighted by the scale of relief requirements for Iraq, relative to the lack of food stocks available for minimum global food consumption.

Over the latter half of the 1980s, annual world output of cereals of all types (wheat, rice, millet, and others) was less than the annual average consumption for three years in a row. This meant a drastic drawdown in staple cereals stocks. The annual carryover of reserve grain stocks fell below 16%—the level considered by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as the absolute minimum for food security. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and related financial control centers demanded that poor nations, if hit by bad weather and poor harvests, simply accept hunger and starvation for their people. Annual food relief given through the World Food Program fell from over 13 million tons to barely 9.9 million tons last year.

The 1990 crop year saw good grain crops in the northern latitudes—especially in the Soviet Union and the United States. The grain monopolies—Cargill, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus, André/Garnac, Toepfer/ADM, Continental and a few others—dropped the price of wheat paid to the farmer to only \$2.40 a bushel, claiming there was a wheat glut.

However, one good year does not make up for a series of low harvests and desperate, unmet food needs. In the 1990 crop year, harvests of grains were below needed consumption levels in both South America and Africa. The disintegrating Soviet economy is not able to make good use of its 1990 harvest. And the very low wheat prices are jeopardizing farmers' ability to plant the next crop, or even to remain in operation, on all continents.

Iraq crisis makes things worse

The particular crisis area as of 1990 is sub-Saharan Africa, where two years of dry weather, after decades of prevention of agriculture infrastructure (irrigation, canals, mechanization, and crop protection), have created a need for millions of tons of relief cereals in 1991.

In this context, the obliteration-bombing of Iraq has added an extraordinary additional requirement of over 4 million tons of relief food for 1991, including over 3 million tons of cereal staples. Unless more food is produced and mobilized as aid for Iraq and other areas of need, trade-offs between recipient nations will mean genocide.

The U.N. FAO addressed the problem at its March meet-

ing in Rome of the 16th session of the Committee on World Food Security. A report was issued entitled "FAO Confirms Record Global Cereal Output in 1990 and Warns of Worsening of Regional Food Supplies." This report has stark statistics on unmet food needs, even without its taking into account the food required for Iraq.

"World cereal production has increased by 4%, from 1,706 million tons in 1989 to 1,784 million tons in 1990 due largely to sharp increases in North America, Asia, notably China, India and Bangladesh," the release states. "Although the 1990 harvest was a record for low-income food-deficit countries as a whole, cereal production declined in Africa and Latin America, deteriorating further the food supply situation and increasing the number of countries requiring external assistance."

FAO head Edouard Saouma stressed that Africa has 15 of the 24 countries facing exceptional food shortages. He said, "For a large number of developing countries, the burden imposed by the conflict in the Gulf has exacerbated their economic and social difficulties. For instance, submissions to the Security Council of the United Nations for compensation cite the losses of export markets and additional import costs, including for petroleum and agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides; and the disruption of development programs due to the curtailment of foreign funding. Indeed, for many developing countries, in place of the hoped-for "peace-dividend" a "war-debt" has accumulated, straining their already frail economies."

The response to this picture in Washington, D.C. has been to propose sweeping powers for the U.N. to decide which nations get food and which are deprived.

The Bush administration is also curtailing U.S. food output. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has decreed that there be a 15% reduction in 1991 wheat acreage (set-aside) for farmers electing to have federal income supports. The USDA has also insisted that farm milk prices remain at the \$10.10 per hundredweight (cwt) floor price, when dairy farmers desperately need more money to survive. The parity, or fair price, to cover costs and give a return on investment, would be \$27 per cwt.

Besides the need for thousands of pounds of dried milk powder for international relief, there are gaping shortages of dairy products for the U.S. national school lunch program, and for the aid to the elderly, women, and infants programs. When Congress voted to increase the farm milk price to over \$13 per cwt, the administration refused to approve it. Instead, the USDA has announced it will pursue its Dairy Export Incentive Program, to give private milk cartel dealers bonuses for selling scarce U.S. dairy commodities to State Department-approved nations abroad.

Farmers in the rest of the Anglo-American sector are also being hit. Over 30% of the Australian wheatgrowers face inability to put in the next wheat crop this June, because of low prices and lack of credit.