Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Foreign debt and the hunger crisis

Many African nations are realizing that their only hope is a restructuring of the international financial system.

"Only the creation of a new world economic order can end the problem of starvation in Africa. Unless we achieve this, Africans will come begging at your door again next year, and you will see 'Third World' conditions spreading into Europe and the United States," warned Rev. Mpolesha Dibala at a series of conferences on stopping the hunger crisis in Africa, organized by the Club of Life throughout Europe in June. Reverend Dibala, who heads the Kinshasa Ecumenical Center in Zaire and is a founding member of the Club of Life, attacked "international assassins" such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other organizations which are literally "killing" Africa.

The Club of Life proposes an emergency action program in the face of the starvation of 150 million Africans: 1) to restore the conditions, including credit, for U.S. and European farmers to relaunch production; and 2) to enact bilateral agreements to ship food surpluses to Africa *now,* along with the infrastructure needed for Africans to upgrade their own production. The problem is not lack of means, but political will: Such U.N. organizations as the Food and Agriculture Organization keep African leaders hopelessly entangled in bureaucratic discussions while the IMF, the World Bank and other usury-promoting institutions destroy what is left of the African nations' economies.

Recognition of this reality has started to creep into the discussions of even some United Nations outfits. At the annual meeting of the United Nations World Food Council (WFC), in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in the second week of June, delegates blamed the "imbalance in the international economic order" for hunger in Africa. The delegates stressed that while drought and spreading desertification contributed to the shortages, "human controlled factors are more important." High interest rates and the debt burden of the developing sector nations were cited among the causes.

In its report to the delegates, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) said that the price drop for basic products and the deterioration in terms of trade had reduced the real value of exports. The OAU report said that in Africa, where the food situation was "alarming" in 24 countries, "food production per capita has decreased over the past 20 years," adding that "Africans today have much less to eat than they did 10 years ago." *U.N. reports have indicated that African food production per capita in 1980 was 15% less than it was in 1970!*

But the World Food Council could only propose such band-aid remedies as increased emergency aid to Africa, and assistance for all Third World countries "directed at development of human potential." The murderous conditionalities imposed by the IMF were not mentioned, nor was the fact that international banks are refusing to lend money to African nations which refuse to sign agreements with the IMF to implement austerity programs.

For the first time, the issue of foreign debt was raised at a recent meeting of African finance ministers in Addis Ababa. African debt is estimated at about $107 billion. While small in comparison to Ibero-America's debt, measured in per capita terms it is as high or higher. Mauritania's per capita debt, for example, is $487 compared to the Brazilian per capita debt of $480.

African diplomats have stressed that until this problem is solved, perhaps along the lines now being discussed in Ibero-America, African nations will have to use the lion's share of their export revenue to pay debt service, leaving insufficient funds to pay for food imports.

The international conference of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) slated for August in Vienna, is due to take up the issue of the industrialization of the developing sector. Previously the organization has consistently promoted small-scale, low-technology projects for the Third World, but in an unusual change of position, Abd el Rahman, the executive director of UNIDO, wrote in his report to the conference that "Industry is a necessity for economies advancing beyond subsistence agriculture. The satisfaction of basic needs and the provision of employment can be secured only through a combination of industrial growth and its dynamic impact on other sectors."

He defended developing sector nations against the demands of the IMF: "Shortages and devaluations have accelerated inflation in these countries. They could hardly be expected to tighten their belts any more, and if they did, the social consequences would be severe. . . . The present high, even usurious interest rates affect profitability of existing firms, viability of new projects, and the balance of payments position of countries."