

'World food summit' ignores debt issue

By Mary Lalevée

"We can say that international organizations have failed," said the Minister of Agriculture of Madagascar, Jose Andrianoelison, speaking at the 23rd biannual meeting of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome on Nov. 13. "Per capita food production in Africa is less than it was 10 years ago." He went on, "Of course, we shouldn't only blame the organizations and our capricious climate. States are responsible for the situation of their people. However, what do we see? Debt servicing is one half of our export earnings!"

The speech by Andrianoelison was one of the few declarations at the FAO conference to directly reflect the impact of Peruvian President Alan García's speech on the first day of the meeting. Present were agriculture ministers from over 100 countries. García's outright challenge to the International Monetary Fund and the international banks, actually accusing the IMF of worsening the problem of hunger in the developing sector, drew a standing ovation from the assembled ministers, and led to several days of excited discussions in the corridors.

However, the general tone of *public* debate followed a common pattern, each speaker presenting the achievements of his own government in respect to agriculture. The wider issues were addressed only rarely.

In his keynote address, FAO Director General Edouard Saouma described the global harvest in 1985 as "satisfactory," including in most of Africa, but said that developing countries faced a difficult future due to their debt burden, protectionism, and falling prices of agricultural commodities (most African exports are agricultural commodities such as coffee, tea, or groundnuts).

The minister of agriculture from Bangladesh, M.A. Munim, reminded the assembly that 40 years after the creation of the FAO, 500 million people are still undernourished to the point of suffering physical handicaps, and the Algerian spokesman stressed the "paradox" of "abundance" of food in the developed sector and dramatic shortages in the developing sector. The delegate from Uganda, Cyprian Ajiku, drew a bleak picture of the situation there, describing how difficult

it was for the government to import the food that was needed, "even though cereal prices are low." He also stressed: "Our difficulties are compounded by our heavy debt burden." (Uganda has been regarded as a model by the IMF, for its careful implementation of all loan conditionalities.)

for help to eradicate the scourges of rinderpest and tsetse fly from the region, and stressed the need to stick to a regional approach, and not a country by country approach.

The FAO has proposed a draft World Food Security Compact, in which several general principles are laid down: "World food security is a common responsibility of mankind. . . . Achievement of the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger depends ultimately on the abolition of poverty." It calls for the stimulation of food production in the developing countries.

The United States, Canada, and Australia dissociated their governments from the text of the draft, and are unlikely to agree to it. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture John Block told a press conference at the meeting that the Compact was "mere rhetoric. We need action, not more rhetoric. . . ." While this is true, what action would be forthcoming from the United States was not clear.

Block's position on the question of how the developing sector should deal with its debt problems was a defense, if ambivalent, of the IMF. "We in the United States believe in the World Bank and the IMF, and think they can serve a useful purpose. That doesn't mean everything they do would meet with my favor or the President's favor, but on balance they're trying to be helpful." He went on to compare the developing sector nations to American farmers: "The banks have sometimes provided the farmers with more [loans] than they should have. . . . Now times have turned sour, and the farmer can't pay the loans back. So the individual and the banks are negotiating. . . . Sometimes the farmers go bankrupt, but usually an agreement is made that the farmers pay what they can. And they should, that's their obligation."

In his speech, Block praised African governments who had implemented IMF demands, which he described as "difficult reforms in agricultural policies—higher prices for farmers, decontrol in consumer food prices, more attention to regional trade, and encouragement for private enterprise."

The most direct response to García's speech came in a personal message from Cuban leader Fidel Castro, which was read by the Cuban agriculture minister. "Indebted countries must not pay their debts," Castro said in the statement. "The debt is not payable." He called for a 12% reduction in military expenditures, part of which could be used to finance the cancellation of foreign debts, he said. He made no mention of the role of the IMF, nor of the fact that Cuba is faithfully paying all of its debts to the East bloc. Italian Prime Minister Craxi commented on the statement, "It is a proposal which postpones a just solution to an extremely urgent problem."