
Africa

Survival of millions is threatened

by Mary Lalevée

On Aug. 18, the International Red Cross announced that it was suspending flights of food and other air into several towns in southern Sudan, following the shooting down above the city Malakhal of a civilian airliner shortly after take-off from the airport of Wau in southern Sudan. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), actively backed by Ethiopia, claimed responsibility, announcing it had used a SAM-7 missile in the operation. All of the 60 passengers and crew were killed.

Later, the SPLA announced it would fire on any aircraft flying over the territory it controls, whether military or civilian. A spokesman for the SPLA, interviewed on Aug. 18 by Radio France Internationale, justified the actions of the rebels in de facto cutting supplies of food aid into the starving areas of the south: "Relief aid is abused by the Sudanese government. Aid is going to the Sudanese army."

Since 2 million Sudanese are facing starvation, the SPLA is deliberately allowing the famine in the region to worsen, in order to win more support for its secessionist efforts. "Sudan's famine is SPLA leader Col. John Garang's best weapon," commented a local observer.

Dramatic as it is, this is just one crisis among many in Africa. Just how bad the situation is in the Sudan and other African countries, hit by rebellions, civil wars, insurgencies, and by draconian austerity measures, is described in a grim report issued by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), on Aug. 12.

In its previous report, "Within Human Reach," issued at the end of 1985, Unicef had strongly criticized the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for insisting on austerity measures in Africa which had *directly* led to increased infant and maternal mortality rates—through cut-backs in health care, social services, and infrastructure. Its latest report, "Update on Emergency Assistance to Affected Countries in Africa," does not name explicitly these organizations, but is still a damning indictment of those who insist that African nations must first pay their debts, devalue their currencies—making vaccines more expensive and cutting revenue from raw material exports which are already at all time low-prices—and cut government spending.

The reports says: "Locusts, grasshoppers, armyworms, and rats threaten hundreds of thousands of acres throughout Africa, and the survival of millions of African people, just recovering from drought and famine."

In Sudan, malnutrition among children in the South is "approaching the 1984-1985 famine rates," says the report. "Prolonged rains and absence of any kind of shelter makes their condition particularly miserable." Some towns in the South are deserted, while the towns of Juba, Wau, and Malakhal have taken in respectively 50,000, 40,000, and 35,000 refugees, mainly women and children. A recent report from Oxfam reveals that of 1,600 recent arrivals at one camp, 14% to 28% of the children suffered from malnutrition. "Some 2.5 million people, largely women and children, will need food aid, well into 1987. . . . The majority of the population, particularly children, are still highly vulnerable to outbreaks of infectious diseases [such as measles and typhoid]," continues the Unicef report.

In Chad, a plague of grasshoppers is threatening "devastation," writes Unicef. The grasshoppers, which last year destroyed some 60,000 tons of cereals, have laid eggs, which hatched in the rainy season. Grasshoppers have been found at a rate of 500,000 per hectare in areas 80 km south of the capital, N'djamena. The FAO reports that despite urgent appeals to the international community for pesticides: "No pesticides have been delivered to Chad as yet. Requests for help from rural provinces throughout the country are reaching crisis proportions," adds Unicef. With no action taken so far, a "second attack" of grasshoppers is expected by September, striking leaves and heads of fully grown plants, killing not only the final crops but also next year's seeds.

Burkina Fasso (Upper Volta), Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Cape Verde are described by the Unicef report as being "under siege" from grasshoppers, while in Sudan and Ethiopia, widespread infestations of African migratory locusts are reported. In Mozambique and Zambia, swarms of red locusts were produced in three areas for the first time since the plagues in 1930 and 1944. In Botswana, swarms of brown locusts have extended over the south, threatening more than 20% of the crops with devastation.

Unicef also reports that Ghana, a country which has signed multiple agreements with the IMF, there has been a "marked deterioration in the situation of mothers and children over the last few years—as basic services and other essential needs have become critically limited." The under-five mortality rate in Ghana has increased from 110 per thousand in 1983 to 155 per thousand in 1985. Malnutrition rates among children are running at 30%. There are several cases of AIDS in Ghana not reported by the Unicef report.

Conditions in other African countries are as bad: According to the conclusion of the Unicef report, millions of people, especially children, are threatened in Angola, Botswana, Burkina Fasso, Cape Verde, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sudan, and Zambia.