

U.S., U.N. watch as locusts sweep Africa

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

Four U.S.-financed DC-7 planes equipped for pesticide spraying have been sitting idle for a week in Senegal, because the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), with the backing of the U.S. State Department, has blocked their use in other African countries to fight the plague of locusts and grasshoppers.

As of Sept. 18, the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, which sent the big planes to spray 900,000 acres in Senegal, had capitulated to the FAO, and the planes were not sent on to spray 500,000 acres in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta), as planned.

As a result, the threat of starvation and death still hangs over the continent of Africa, while the Senegalese grasshopper and four species of locusts—the worst infestation in 60 years—are given free rein in a vast area to breed and multiply.

Although the FAO says the problem is under control, The world could be confronted with a "locust-induced famine, instead of a drought-induced famine," the head of the U.N. Office of Emergency Operations in Africa said in a report to the Economic Community in Geneva on Sept. 18. Charles Lamuniere said that \$5 billion was needed urgently in five African nations alone. "Although their [Africans'] emergency needs derive now from a combination of factors that go beyond the famine, they are nevertheless just as acute and urgent. . . .

How does the U.S. State Department sum up this grim situation? "As best we know, things are under control," a State Department source told this reporter Sept. 16.

Not only is aerial spraying being delayed, but the State Department Agency for International Development, AID, is sitting on a contract with the U.S. weather agency, NOAA, thus preventing NOAA from preparing a new set of locust-watch maps for Africa that chart the topsoil moisture and indicate what areas are most favorable for locust and grasshopper breeding.

Although the FAO and the U.S. State Department claim that everything is just fine, current emergency requests from at least three African countries for aid in fighting the insect plague have been denied:

- Burkina Faso, whose entomologists and other specialists requested big-plane spraying for 500,000 acres infested by grasshoppers, was told by the FAO that only one-fifth that area would get treated.

- Niger, whose agriculture minister made a special appeal for funds to fight grasshoppers and rats Sept. 6, is deemed to be "coping with the situation" without any further assistance, according to the FAO.

this assessment, saying that the situation in Niger was "extraordinarily good."

- Botswana, in southern Africa, requested \$8 million to stop the brown locust swarms from spreading across and out of the country. The money was to be used for aerial spraying of 1 million hectares (2.47 million acres) and setting up 100 ground teams to monitor the situation. The FAO has rejected the Botswana government's approach. "They are too ambitious. They are planning to spray more than the capabilities," said FAO senior officer Mr. Rafink Skaf in an interview Sept. 18.

Overpopulation?

There is no way to understand why the State Department and FAO are standing by while a locust plague rages out of control, except by looking at their population policy: They believe that Africa would be better off with fewer people.

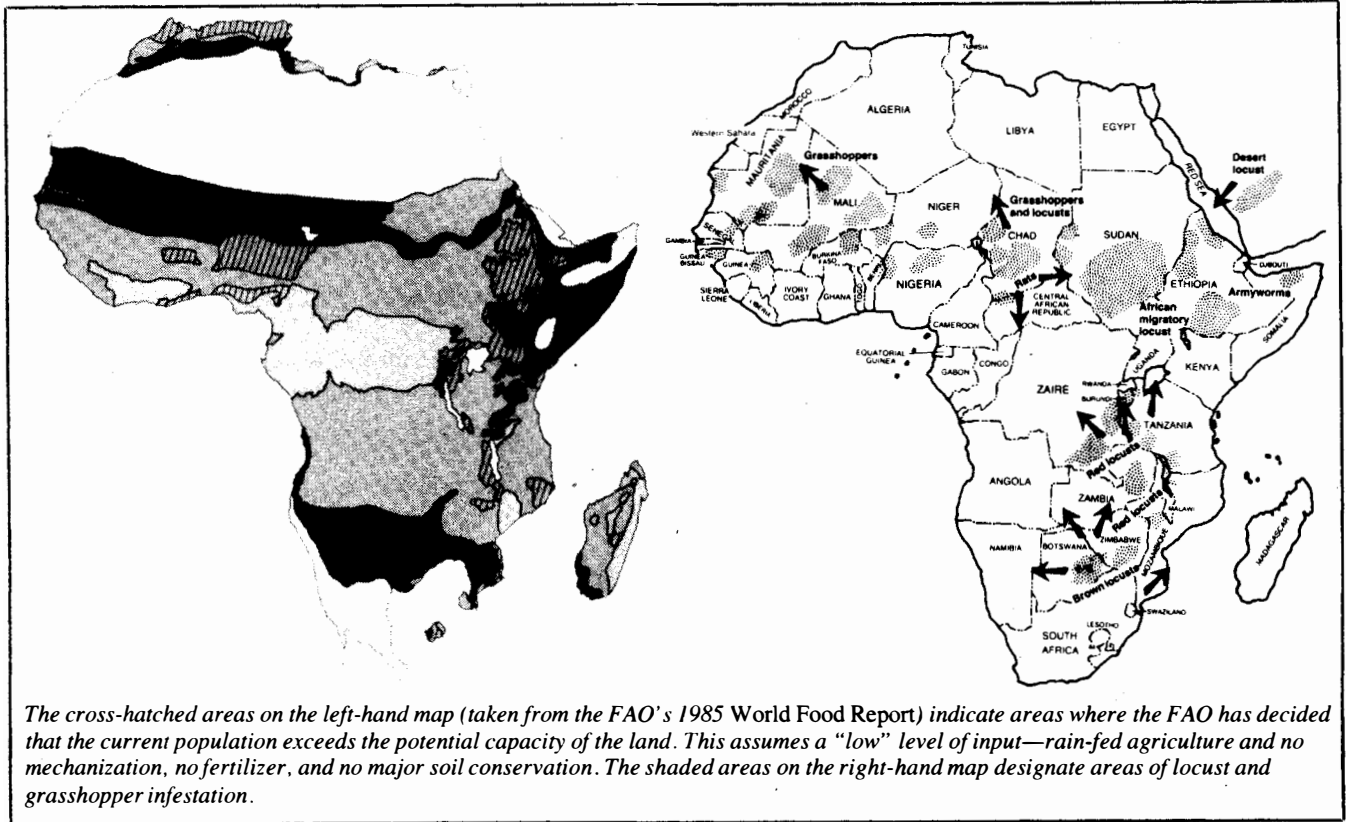
In fact, Africa is underpopulated. Africa's population density is 193.6 per 1,000 hectares of usable land, compared to a world average of 333.9.

The FAO explains the famine in Africa by stating bluntly in its 1985 *World Food Report*, "Africa is still paying the penalty for a high rate of population growth—some 3 percent a year in 1983 and apparently still rising." In 26 African countries, the FAO notes, per capita "staple food consumption was lower in 1984 than it was in 1970."

This is explained in more technical terms using a model for "potential population-supporting capacity" developed for the FAO by none other than the Soviets' International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis. According to this model, and assuming a continuing "low level" of inputs, the FAO has determined that "the actual population level has exceeded the long-term supporting capacity of much of the Maghreb, the Sahel, the northern areas of Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo, and much of Ethiopia and Somalia—in total, 47 percent of the total land area."

In other words, in its 1985 *World Food Report*, the FAO had already written off almost the entire area of Africa that will be wiped out by locusts and grasshoppers unless there is a military-style big-plane effort to stop the plague.

Was the FAO always genocidal in its thinking? When I asked this of FAO former deputy director-general Dr. Ralph W. Phillips, who retired in 1981, he said that the population problem had worried him since the 1950s: "There has to be an end point to population growth, an end point to what you can do to Mother Earth without destroying her."



Interview: Rafkin Skaf

'Controlling locusts just costs too much'

Rafink Skaf, senior officer, U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, Emergency Locust Control Center, Rome, was interviewed Sept. 5 by Marjorie Mazel Hecht, managing editor of Fusion magazine. Mr. Skaf, an entomologist, has been with the FAO for 21 years. Here are excerpts of his interview.

Hecht: Will the big planes used in Senegal, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, be used to spray in the rest of the Sahel area?

Skaf: I think there is an approach that this will work in Burkina Faso, but it has not yet been decided.

Hecht: Who has to decide?

Skaf: Mainly, the government of Burkina Faso has to request assistance from the United States.

Hecht: What would make these countries hesitate to ask for

these big planes?

Skaf: When you use a big plane, you must have a large area to cover. And this would consume large quantities of pesticide. The type of infestation of grasshoppers does not always necessarily require large spraying. In most cases it's scattered infestations. You may have high densities in some spots, but not to justify large-scale spraying. It would be really not economical. . . .

Hecht: But my understanding from FAO figures is that the infestation is large-scale in that country and also in Mali and Mauritania.

Skaf: You have one area between Mauritania and northern Mali and eastern Senegal, in that triangle, that is infested in some spots. But when you undertake large-scale control covering hundreds of thousands of hectares, of course, you reduce the numbers of the population, but you cannot avoid further breeding coming from surrounding areas, which again breed and enter the controlled area, so you will need a further effort. . . . Also, you have a lot of parasites which are naturally in all this vast area, and they will be stricken in any large-scale operation.

Hecht: Why are you worried about the parasites?

Skaf: Normally, there is a large natural mortality of the population while it is breeding, so any resulting population after such spraying would be devoid of parasites.