

FAO watches as locusts hit Africa

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

After a 1986 anti-locust campaign that was too little too late, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is repeating that failure this year—with devastating results for Africa.

By April 1987, eight countries in West Africa and the Sahel had declared a disaster because of the heavy grasshopper and locust infestation: Burkina Faso, Chad, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sudan. In northern Nigeria, the FAO reported that the number of grasshopper egg pods was the highest ever recorded: 1.3 million hectares require emergency treatment.

In addition, swarms of desert locusts are already sweeping through East Africa and across the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia. Larger swarms are predicted later this year in Chad, Somalia, and northern Kenya. In northern Ethiopia and Sudan, the situation is “alarming,” said Lukas Brader, head of FAO’s Emergency Center for Locust Operations. Locust swarms in Ethiopia took over the runway, forcing the airport at Asmara to close.

The United States has the large planes, DC-7s, available to spray hundreds of thousands of acres quickly—1,000 miles per sortie, flying at 200 miles per hour and cutting a swath 660 feet wide. So far, the State Department has declined to use the big planes, instead implementing the FAO’s malthusian policy that has written off Africa’s population.

Deliberate failure

As I reported last year in *EIR*, it was the FAO failure to spray infested grasslands in 1986 that ensured that new generations of locusts and grasshoppers would hatch out of control this spring from eggs laid last year. By mid- to late-July, depending on the rains in West Africa, millions of grasshopper eggs will begin hatching, leaving just 30 days in which to kill the pests before they mature and lay another generation of eggs. The timing is crucial, for each new generation is 10 times larger than the previous one.

Right now, the United States has committed \$7.6 million to the anti-locust fight, sending teams of specialists to West Africa and the Sahel and sending two small spraying planes to Senegal, with larger DC-7s on standby.

Until the hatching actually begins, the dimensions of the infestation are not known. However, to succeed in stopping the plague, the United States must wage an all-out war against the pests—and this means taking on the FAO on the question

of widescale pesticide spraying.

The FAO claimed in fall 1986 that their efforts had been “successful.” Now they plan to repeat their deliberately ineffective campaign, piecing together international donations of small planes and hand-sprayers to dispense over millions of infested acres.

FAO locust chief Brader adamantly defended this small-scale approach in an interview with this author in February 1987. When told that U.S. entomologists universally disagreed, Brader stated that the FAO preferred a “different approach.”

This FAO policy guarantees the loss of food crops and grazing land for cattle in a continent already decimated by drought and starvation. It is no accident that the worst-hit plague areas coincide with those same areas where the FAO thinks the African population has exceeded the land’s “carrying capacity.”

The destruction of food crops and grazing land by billions of these voracious insects can be stopped this year, as it could have been stopped last year. The FAO simply has to follow the successful method by which the United States has kept locusts and grasshoppers from taking over America’s food supply: careful monitoring using the most advanced satellite technologies, widescale pesticide spraying, and adequate funding to carry out the program in time to prevent the insects from breeding. The United States now routinely spends about \$35 million a year in grasshopper control, aerially spraying about 13 million acres of grasslands.

An ancient scourge

The locust has periodically devastated Africa, the Middle East, and southern Asia for centuries. Man has fought at least five great wars against locusts in this century, the last major battle being in 1967-68, when locusts migrated from Sudan, west across the Sahel to Morocco, and from Saudi Arabia to the Mideast, Iran, and India.

There are 10,000 species of grasshoppers in the world, about a dozen of which are known as locusts. There is not much difference between them, except that all locusts have the potential to become gregarious when a certain population threshold is reached—swarming out of their breeding areas by the millions, migrating where the winds take them, stripping all vegetation where they land, and leaving one or two generations of eggs behind. Locusts travel up to 3,000 miles per generation.

Their destructive power is staggering: Locusts have a powerful chewing jaw and can eat 2 to 3 grams each day—two to three times their weight. Thus, an adult swarm of locusts can go through 200 to 600 tons of vegetation daily, leaving only starvation for the human and animal inhabitants.

Even when grasshoppers are not in a swarm stage, they can demolish the vegetation. Just one grasshopper per square yard over a 1-acre area can consume 12 to 15 pounds of forage over a 30-day period.