

Global food shortage means African famine

by Marcia Merry

Edouard Saouma, head of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, said on Dec. 20 that the famine danger in Ethiopia and other parts of Africa is "increasing at an alarming rate." Millions are in danger, he said, unless there is a "relief effort of major proportions."

Saouma said there were serious food shortages not only in Ethiopia, but also in southern Sudan, Mozambique, and Angola. There was severe drought in northern Ethiopia, creating famine conditions in Eritrea and parts of Tigre. In western Africa and Sudan, 5.7 million hectares of cropland (14 million acres) were affected by grasshoppers in recent months.

Saouma made repeated calls for aid to Africa during 1989, and in October the FAO published a "Special Report on Africa," listing areas for priority action. "First priority," according to the report, "is the necessity for allocation of substantial additional pledges and the prompt arrangement of shipments of food to northern Ethiopia to meet the outstanding requirements in 1989 and the continuing deficit in 1990. Only early action will avert migrations and widespread suffering in 1990."

As of December 1989, this action had not been taken. Saouma reported on the further rundown in world food stocks in 1989, which was the third consecutive year in which cereals consumption exceeded production.

World output inadequate

In its October forecast, the FAO office estimated that total world grain output for 1989 will be 1.86 billion tons, which is below average annual grain consumption.

There is no part of the world where the harvest picture is promising. In the Southern Hemisphere—now finishing its wheat harvest, and well into the summer season for other crops—there is no rescue in sight.

Australian wheat exports are expected to be the lowest in nine years due to harvest problems. Australia will produce about 12.63 million tons of wheat this season, which is about 1.39 million tons less than last year, according to the December estimates of the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics. The wheat harvest in Australia starts in November, and is almost completed by early January.

Although Australian farmers planted 500,000 more acres

of wheat in 1989 than in 1988, for a total of 22 million acres in 1989, nevertheless, a long dry spell cut yields from last year's 23.5 bushels an acre, to an estimated 20.9 bushels an acre this year. With wheat output down, Australia expects to export only about 9.27 million tons this year, down from 11.32 million tons last year, and a record 15.4 million tons in 1979-80.

In South Africa, a prolonged drought has reduced the wheat crop, and forced the government to make plans to draw on wheat reserves for domestic needs this year. South African wheat exports will be at most 300,000 tons.

The situation in rice underscores the inadequate harvests and falling stocks of all grains worldwide. Global rice output for 1989 was forecast at 331 million metric tons. This is a slight increase over the year before, but nevertheless, it is below the average annual world consumption of rice. Total world rice consumption is forecast for 1989 at 345 million tons. Thus rice stocks, already dangerously low, are being drawn down.

Rice accounts for 20% of global grain output, corn is about 25%, and wheat is 30%. The remainder of world annual grain production comes from millet, rye, oats, sorghum, and some other grains and mixed grains. Stocks are below the danger point for all grains.

For over a year, the FAO has been calling for special crop efforts to begin to rebuild all these grain stocks, but the world food cartel interests have blocked any effective national measures to create a farm production mobilization.

Grain for relief purposes has dropped from an annual level of 13 million metric tons in the World Food Program in 1987-88, down to less than 8.3 million metric tons forecast for 1989-90. This reflects the lack of pledges and deliveries by the grain-exporting nations, the United States and Canada, Western Europe, and Thailand.

Meeting the minimum emergency grain needs of Africa has been deliberately bypassed by Washington and the European Community, in favor of sending grain to Russia and Communist China for political reasons.

In November, U.S. trade officials met in Moscow for three days, and announced that the U.S.S.R. could have as much as 20 million metric tons of grain a year from the United States, without resorting to consultations with Washington. From 1983 to 1988, the annual limit was 9 million tons. Then in 1989, the limit was raised to 16 million tons.

It is expected that the actual grain shipments from the United States to the Soviet Union may reach a record 36 million tons of wheat, corn, and soybean products this 1989-90 trade year, up from a huge 24 million tons last trade year.

In 1989, the People's Republic of China was the world's biggest importer of wheat, purchasing over 16 million metric tons, half of which came from the United States. Chinese trade envoy Zheng Wanzhen has told U.S. agriculture officials that China expects to continue high rates of grain imports in 1990.