

UN Session on Food: No Solutions Offered

by Leni Rubinstein, UN Correspondent

On July 18, the UN General Assembly held a special session on the Global Food and Energy Crisis. While a number of important speeches were delivered, no concerted action resulted from the session. The task force created to help solve the crisis, is part of the problem.

This last Spring UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon created his High-Level Task Force, led by longtime UN bureaucrat Sir John Holmes, tasked with dealing with the food and energy crisis. This resulted in the issuing in mid-July of the so-called Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA) document, the which was the basis for the special session at the UN July 18.

Representatives from a number of nations spoke harshly about the severity of the crisis. Some sent out a dire cry for help, and several referred to, and expressed their support for, the proposal, issued in June, from Chile, Egypt, and Indonesia, that food security and development should be the main theme of the general debate of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly, which begins in September.

Below follows a brief account of a couple of the sharpest statements from that day's discussion.

Raza Bashir Tarar, Acting Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN, made it clear in his speech, that the current food crisis, which is affecting billions, has political origins. "The crisis is a result of neglect of agriculture, bad policies on trade, bio-fuels, market speculations, natural disasters, and the impact of climate change," he stated. Tarar refuted the claim, that the rise in energy prices is due to a supply-demand gap, and listed three main factors for the price hike: First, lack of sufficient refining capacity, including in the most industrialized countries. Second, speculation: "Speculation in food and fuel benefits only the speculators, hedge funds and traders.... It is neither beneficial for the common man, nor the economy." And, third, the doomsday security scenario for the oil-rich areas: Tarar referred to the "increasing rhetoric about imminent conflicts and strikes in the Gulf, coupled with the problems in Nigeria and Sudan," as having been a major factor in pushing up the prices.

Finally, without, however, posing any solutions, Tarar warned about the impact of the current financial crisis. Were it to develop into a full-blown systemic financial crisis, he said, it would be important to take steps to prevent a major depressive impact on the economies of the South. The speech ends with a dire warning: "Procrastination and inaction will be catastrophic. We need to act and act now."

Of the speeches that *EIR* obtained from the debate, the most comprehensive in dealing with the crisis, as well as the most revealing as to the intention of the Task Force, was the one delivered by Nirupam Sen, Permanent Representative of India to the UN.

Sen began by emphasizing the appropriateness of dealing with the food and energy crises as an integrated matter, and added, "It would have been even more useful to consider today the third crisis also—i.e., the global financial crisis, which is posing its interrelated challenges to our development efforts. Any meaningful response must address all these three issues."

Throughout his speech Sen attacked the contents of the CFA, as well as directly and indirectly (very thinly veiled) the High-Level Task Force, which produced it. He described the CFA as "voluminous," and noted that the document was made available just a couple of days before the session. He then pointed out, that the CFA is supposed to be the consensus view of the UN on how to respond to the global food crisis, but that no, or very minimal, contribution by member states has been included by the CFA. As he noted, sarcastically, "Let me reiterate, that the contents of the CFA would have been enriched, and made easier to implement, if ideas and suggestions of Member States had been taken on board...."

You cannot "present the desperation of millions of vulnerable people in their struggle to feed themselves as an opportunity," he went on to say. Sen described the shift away from food crops to cash crops for export as devastating for food security, and continues, "It is good that the right of food has been recognized in the CFA—we would have hoped for better recommendations to ensure its realization."

Sen derided the CFA, and the FAO, for addressing the issue of bio-fuels incorrectly, in terms of generalities of recent supply and demand dynamics, and referred, in quite some detail, to the recent (secret) World Bank Report by Don Mitchell, which finds biofuels responsible for 75% of the price increases, and that biofuels production has distorted food markets by diverting grain away from food to fuel, taking away land for biofuel production, and sparking financial speculation in food grains. Sen correctly accused the CFA of turning facts inside-out, when "it calls speculation a consequence of food export restrictions, when these restrictions are clearly a consequence of the inflation fueled by speculation." Also pointed out is the glaring lack from the CFA of any meaningful reference to technology, where agricultural research and development, and transferring new technology to farmers, are crucial to increase global food production. The speech ended on an optimistic note, proudly referring to the Green Revolution in India as an example, that current global challenges can be met.

It's clear that the High-Level Task Force is "high-level" indeed, and that the intent driving its work is to function as a diversion from any real plan of action.