

LETTER FROM THE HAGUE

Reform, revolution and food



A world conference on feeding the world raised questions, emotions and hopes

by Frederick W. Detje

The World Food Congress held in The Hague last month under the sponsorship of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization was a microcosm of all humankind's major conflicts.

Hostility between generations, authority and hierarchy versus freedom, agricultural productivity versus the purity of the environment were just a few of the issues that surfaced—sometimes in angry polemics.

But despite the conflicts, there was wide agreement among those attending that man's problems can be solved if large enough numbers of men become willing to change their traditional approaches. There was no doubt of the consensus in favor of changes in a radical rather than a more conservative direction.

"It would be futile and unrealistic," said Addeke H. Boerma, FAO director-general, "to attempt to discuss hunger and malnutrition in isolation from other evils of our age, such as the stifling clamp of poverty, the flood of overpopulation, the paralysis of unemployment, the deformities of trade. We must look at the economic and social problems of the world in their totality if we are to come to grips with them individually." He warned that the years ahead will be the most hazardous mankind has ever known and that radical changes will have to take place within 20 years if a "conflagration of violence that would sweep through millions of lives" is to be avoided.

More specific matters were discussed in the meetings of eight special commissions. In a session on the environment, for example, Lord Ritchie-Calder of the University of Edinburgh pointed out that the new high-yielding plant varieties which are the backbone of the green revolution which is the hope of ending starvation in underdeveloped countries (SN: 7/6/68, p. 19) also require large amounts of fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides and irrigation.

"In a monsoon country like India," he said, "the fertilizer, pesticides and herbicides will be washed into the River Ganges and the Bay of Bengal," causing pollution of unpredictable magnitude.

Roger Revelle of the Center for Population Studies at Harvard University said that the oceans may be severely damaged by pollution, especially from oil spills, within two or three decades. "The resulting loss of marine life may deny man one of his most important sources of protein," he warned.

C. Axel Iveroth, director-general of the Swedish Federation of Industries,

held out hope that industry itself may one day become the most active anti-pollution force. Swedish industry, he said, has set up a sort of early warning system, "which is often far ahead of the politicians and bureaucrats. As a result we often act against pollution before any legislation is even proposed."

The United States came under much criticism at the congress—most of it from citizens of the United States—for its support of reactionary regimes and its failure to mobilize its great resources in the interests of all mankind.

The 130 Americans registered—of a total of 1,500 participants—called for a new dedication on the part of the United States toward solving world problems.

"Our presence at this congress manifests our concern for the gross inequalities in economic wealth and human opportunity which divide the world into two camps of haves and have-nots, privileged and underprivileged," said the American statement.

H. K. Quartey-Papafio, chief irrigation officer in Ghana's Agriculture Ministry, spoke from the point of view of the underdeveloped countries when he said: "The green revolution is with us, but it is not within our reach."

"We know about high-yielding plant varieties, fertilizer, irrigation, vaccines against animal disease and so forth. But we lack the infrastructure to make it all work—the access roads, the storage facilities, the marketing arrangements." It is up to the developed countries to help underdeveloped countries to build this infrastructure, he said.

A special session for youth at the congress resulted in a confrontation between what one young spokesman called the "outdated structures of society" and the new, free youth of the world. But there was much effort from both sides to bridge the gap. "It is no use rejecting us because we are too old," said Dr. I. Mann of Kenya. "We need you and you need us."

As the meeting ended, it was clear that man has the means to solve his problems—but whether or not he has the will was no clearer than it ever was. The delegates from the underdeveloped nations were dubious on this point as was the youthful element.

A delegate from Dahomey, for instance, suggested that if the developed nations were really serious about solving the problems of the third world, they would have held the congress in Africa, where delegates from the West would at least have had a glimpse of what the problems really are.