

Food conference: Let them eat words?

After a summer of inaction following the first omens that famine may soon strike several areas of the world (SN: 1/11/74, p. 306), international leaders are preparing to meet in Rome to discuss the problem during a two-week World Food Conference. They face two great challenges: for the immediate future, providing emergency supplies to people threatened with starvation, despite poor crops in exporting countries and global belt-tightening due to high oil prices; for the long run, achieving the scientific and economic breakthroughs needed for greater crop production and more equitable distribution of food. Considering the pointedly "low profile" posture of the United States toward the conference, the shift of power toward Middle Eastern countries, and the uncertainty of Russian and Chinese cooperation, stricken nations may receive more rhetoric than food.

The global food outlook is deteriorating, and the director-general of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), A. H. Boerma, told a press conference in Rome the situation is "grave." World soybean production is down seven percent. The American corn crop, already hard hit by drought, has been further damaged by early frost. Canada's wheat supply is the worst in a decade. Erratic monsoons in Asia caused drought in some places, floods in others, lowering rice production. The Russian wheat harvest has failed to meet expectations but they are not saying by how much.

Effects are becoming evident. In Bangladesh, an estimated 15 million people have lost homes, food and jobs because of floods, and have begun to pour by the thousands into the capital city of Dacca for help. The Indian government has so far insisted it can handle on its own a 12 percent decrease in its autumn wheat crop, but in some areas, where harvest losses approach almost 80 percent, state officials are growing increasingly anxious. Meanwhile, relief efforts in the long-stricken Sahel region are going badly. Grain is piling up on coastal docks and has begun to rot. A U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) report admits "some bottlenecks have developed," but press reports from the scene tell of gross mismanagement and open profiteering.

Though expert testimony in Congressional hearings emphasized the gravity of the situation months ago (SN: 7/27/74, p. 53), Governmental action at the policy making level has maintained a stately pace. The controversy centers on what the United States should do toward helping rebuild the

world's depleted stores of grain.

Large, Government-controlled stockpiles of grain have been consistently opposed by Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, who will lead the U.S. delegation to the World Food Conference (after Henry Kissinger makes a speech and flies on). Butz believes reserves should be privately held, subject to free-market forces, lest a politically motivated dumping of stocks should depress prices to farmers. Without mentioning Butz by name, FAO's Boerma replies to such arguments by saying "any purist concept of international free trade in food is dangerously outdated." FAO at first called for internationally controlled reserves, but its leaders now emphasize the need for a "flexible world food policy" and "orderly management of available supplies."

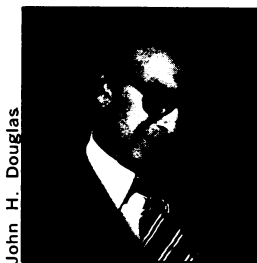
In part, such differences are ideological; in part, the result of an irrepressible official optimism. Butz consistently downplays talk of developing famine and insists the United States should not go to Rome with "a bag full of goodies," for fear of overcommitting its own limited food resources. A staff report produced by the USDA's Economic Research Service clearly shows that department professionals have no illusions over the seriousness of the situation or the need for emergency food stocks. Their report has not yet been released (some Govern-

ment officials say it has been repressed because it departs from the official line—the Agriculture Department denies this). SCIENCE NEWS has obtained a copy. It says, in part: "The world food situation is highly unstable and has been for the past two years. The immediate and long-term future is more uncertain than at any time in the past two decades. . . . The need for a minimum level of stocks to provide famine relief seems clear."

The one thing all parties at the Rome conference are likely to agree on is the need for greatly increased, global agricultural research and development. The most important single element of this commitment is also likely to cause little argument: the urgent need to provide more fertilizer to developing countries whose "green revolution" crops are critically dependent on it. Also, a new system of international research may be worked out—a chain of regional laboratories designed to adapt new "miracle grains" to local conditions and otherwise help improve agricultural productivity in their regions. Meanwhile, the experience and sophistication of existing, foundation-sponsored laboratories may be used to achieve breakthroughs in production capacity of new crops (SN: 10/5/74, p. 218) and to attack the problems of tropical agriculture.

But that effort will also require a massive commitment of money, and the United States clearly goes to Rome with a demand that other nations start sharing more of the cost. □

Handler on famine: Let nature take its course



John H. Douglas

Handler

Some of the grimmest words yet by a responsible official on the world food emergency come from an unlikely source, the soft-spoken president of the National Academy of Sciences, Philip Handler. First in a speech to the annual convocation of Markle Scholars and again this week before the Women's Democratic Club of Washington, Handler said the situation in South Asia may already be hopeless and that the present policy of supporting the region through food aid may prove "counterproductive."

"Cruel as it may sound, if the developed nations do not intend the colossal all-out effort commensurate with this task, then it may be wiser to let 'nature take its course' as Aristotle described it: 'From time to time it is necessary that pestilence, famine and war prune the luxuriant growth of the human race,'" Handler said.

Unchecked, South Asia's population will double by the turn of the century, he said, and unless some way is found to do a better job of helping twice the number of people than we can help now, "we are in very serious danger of doing something which, while soothing our consciences, may lead to the greatest debacle in all of history."

Asked by SCIENCE NEWS whether he was advocating consideration of a policy of triage, of "cutting Asia adrift" (in Lester Brown's phrase, SN: 5/11/74, p. 306), Handler replied: "That's what I was saying, gently. . . . But it ought to be a damn cold-turkey decision—we should not drift into it. We must be aware of the consequences." Is such a policy possible? Considering rising prices for petroleum, which provides fertilizer to grow the world's crops, he said, "I can't imagine not doing it."