

THE GREAT GRAIN GAME

An analysis of the recently concluded World Food Conference in Rome

by John H. Douglas

"Judgment on the success or failure of this conference is going to be made by hungry men in Africa and Asia."—Sayed Marei, general secretary of the World Food Conference.

A rainy first week turned into sunny Indian summer for the conclusion of the World Food Conference in Rome, as more and more delegates slipped away from the drone of business to peer at ancient ruins or stroll beneath the canopy of the famous Roman pines. Windows were thrown open in Mussolini's formidable "Palace of Congresses," which seemed more and more to resemble a goldfish bowl as the meeting progressed. Witless speeches and repetitious statistics conspired with the monolithic structure to increase a sense of isolation—particularly from the reality of starvation, which had brought together the thousand-odd government delegates and perhaps twice as many camp-followers.

In a parody of the Marine Corps slogan ("The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer.") the conference delegates quickly dispensed with easy items of their agenda, and left the difficult for later meetings. Much was accomplished, but many participants had come wanting—perhaps needing—the impossible, in order to stave off famine in their lands: immediate food aid, immediate fertilizer supplies, immediate cooperation between industrialized and developing countries to spread the benefits of technology and agricultural research. Reserves of grain, to prevent catastrophic effects when weather again causes a bad harvest year, will be discussed "as soon as possible." Food aid to countries, which for years will be unable to feed themselves or buy competitively on the open market, should reach ten million tons a year, the conferees agreed—but where the food will come from and who will provide it remained unspecified. In quiet negotiations behind the scenes, Addeke H. Boerma, director general of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), tried to persuade

countries with surplus grain to commit enough emergency aid to make up for this year's seven or eight million ton shortfall, which drastically effects some 32 countries. Again, nothing firm.

Along the corridors, talk turned to "lack of political will," in a word, leadership. As the world's largest producer and exporter of food, the United States inevitably became the focal point of the arguments. Why the "low profile?" delegates asked. Why the lack of definite commitment, after having called the conference in the first place? Canada took the lead—promising a million tons of grain for next year if others will follow suit; Australia pledged a proportional share. Still no word from the United States.

A group of senators arrived, and immediately a telegram to President Ford was dispatched, asking that the American delegation be authorized to also pledge a million tons of grain. Appearance of delegation leader Earl Butz's name on the request was interpreted as a sign the Secretary of Agriculture had softened his stand that this was not the time or place to make such commitments—first see what the effect would be at home, and hold ministerial negotiations to make sure other nations did their bit.

The United States will almost certainly make such a donation eventually, said Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), "so why not announce it now when it may provide the leadership for other nations to do the same?" Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) went even further: Why not propose a 10 percent cut in military expenditures by the superpowers, and free some \$20 billion a year? To make sure funds were available to pay for the extra million tons, Sen. Richard Clark (D-Iowa) proposed doubling "food for peace" money from \$175 million to \$350 million.

Days passed. No reply came to the telegram; no explanation was offered why there was no reply, nor speculation whether there would be one. Rumors grew that all was not well within the American delegation. Dele-

gation member Donald Paarlberg admitted "we are not doing all we could," and conceded that Humphrey "has a point" on exerting leadership. Talking to a small group of reporters, Paarlberg said that while most crops had had a bad year, wheat and rice harvests in the United States had broken records. "I feel we could scrape up more wheat [for aid]," he said. The resulting inflationary pressures would not be that great—Paarlberg estimated that as much as a seventy cent rise per bushel in the price of wheat would only cause a one cent rise in the price of a loaf of bread.

Finally the senators left, and within hours, Secretary Butz appeared before a press conference to condemn the three most vocal of them for putting the United States "on the defensive." Again and again he lashed out at the "three Democratic senators" who were "trying to make news for themselves," who had made a "lot of noise," and who had caused the issue of the telegram to "escalate." Aid would be forthcoming, but these things were dealt with quarter by quarter.

Hadn't he signed the telegram asking that a million extra tons for emergency relief be committed immediately? Oh, that was just "over my signature" as head of the delegation. Besides, it was only a request for instruction. Besides, the democratic senators had "escalated" the issue.

At the very least, it was a public relations fiasco; at most a lost opportunity to exert humanitarian leadership.

But other confrontations, less well publicized, surely produced beneficial results. Oil exporting countries promised to give more money to help developing countries they met at the conference. A group of seven Arab emirates claimed to be setting aside more than 10 percent of their national income for aid purposes. The Iranian delegate said he was authorized to commit as much as \$5 billion, beginning within two weeks of conference end, should other nations also make major new commitments. Representatives of

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agribusiness and consumer groups both met with delegates, who proposed new measures to make more equitable the commerce between small countries and giant industries that sometimes have as much as ten times greater budgets. Advocates of untrammelled technology found themselves brought up short by delegates from small countries where too rapid introduction of sophisticated techniques had disrupted society, thrown thousands out of work and sometimes ended in complete failure.

At a final press conference, the deputy chief of the American delegation, Edwin Martin, a patient, tireless professional diplomat, tried to smooth over some of the feathers ruffled by earlier dissension. "A two-week conference won't grow wheat or deliver food," he said, but a starving farmer in India may soon begin to feel the effects of the proposals coming from the conference. As for committing grain, "There is no question that there will be some increase in quantity" over last year. By its very existence, the conference had focused attention on the present crisis, and through its successes, would help forestall future ones—provided the nations involved acted on the resolutions passed here. And he pledged the United States to take an active part in that effort.

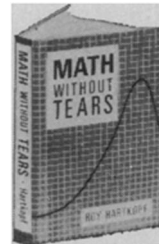
More than seven years ago, the President's Science Advisory Committee warned that living conditions for two-thirds of the human race were deteriorating and that serious food shortages were becoming a "grim reality." Later, FAO sent forth clear warnings of imminent danger. In his address to the conference, U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim said the lack of foresight among nations at not responding to these warnings was "dismaying," and that acting on them could have avoided the worst of the troubles directly ahead. If the conference has created an atmosphere in which such warnings are heeded and in which the role of the scientific community in recognizing and forestalling catastrophe is increased, then the effort must be considered a success.

But a delegate from one of the hardest hit countries told SCIENCE NEWS that he and other Third World representatives were "very disappointed" that an emergency food aid program had not been announced at the conference. At the end, the United States was still reportedly waiting for a more definite commitment from oil producing countries that they would help fund such an effort. But the starving people Sayed Marei spoke of will render a harsh judgment indeed if these negotiations, stemming from the World Food Conference, do not produce quickly a more substantial fare than words. □

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