

Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Africa could reclaim the desert

U.S. Vice-President Bush's note of technological optimism must be joined to the elimination of IMF Malthusianism.

At the United Nations conference on the Africa emergency, U.S. Vice-President George Bush noted that in the 1930s, when the U.S. Central Plains underwent dust-bowl conditions similar to areas of the Sahel today, "farmers lived in a half-lit world beneath the dust clouds of the expanding desert." People said the land would never again produce crops. They were wrong, he said. An important part of the food America is now supplying came from what was once the dust bowl. With more research, Africa too could reclaim its once-productive land.

Bush announced that the United States was prepared to donate half of the emergency food aid needed this year, about 3 million tons, and called on "all concerned [to] put aside political differences to bring relief to those in need," addressing both the Ethiopian government and the secessionist movements in Eritrea and Tigre provinces.

In fact, as the U.N. secretary general says, the current famine is on the verge of killing more people than have lost their lives in any war in history. But this will not be stopped unless the technological optimism shown by Bush is joined with eliminating the Malthusian approach of the International Monetary Fund, which is driving people into starvation faster than food aid can succor them.

Bush's comments on desertification were the first statement in years from a leading Western politician to point out that desertification is not an inevitable, irreversible process. But his call for the "introduction of capitalist-

based economies which encouraged people to grow their own food" evades the crucial issue. The desert cannot be stopped unless a massive program of infrastructure development is begun in an emergency, military fashion—a program blocked by the IMF.

As the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned in its latest report, "The African food emergency is worsening." The FAO reports that although there are fewer countries [21] affected this year, "the crisis is more severe in terms of human suffering and lost production opportunities," aggravated by ecological crisis and spreading disease. In eastern Africa, food supply problems have been worsened by a devastating plague of army worms. Ironically, winds which have brought rain to eastern Africa have also brought brown moths, which lay eggs over a wide area. The larvae hatch within less than a week, and begin eating their way through all tender vegetation in their path. In Kenya, 90,000 acres of farmland were destroyed by the pest. In Tanzania, seven of the country's 22 regions face disaster.

The FAO reports that the food crisis is most acute in Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Sudan. In Ethiopia, there is an acute shortage of supplementary food for drought-affected children. In Mali, half a million people have begun moving south in search of food and water. One million face starvation. In Mozambique, nutrition levels have deteriorated. In Niger, almost no grazing is left for cattle. In Sudan, the refugee

influx is worsening the grave food shortage.

Africa's economic crisis, which led to this disaster, is getting worse because of the IMF's demands for austerity, devaluation, and higher prices for essential items like gasoline.

- Sudan devalued its currency by 48% in February, on demand of the IMF and has just increased the price of oil by 70%, also demanded by the IMF. In Khartoum, factories are closed due to lack of fuel, raw materials, and spare parts.

- Chad, one of the countries facing acute crisis, has been told by the IMF and World Bank its debt of about \$11 million will not be rescheduled.

- Sierra Leone has allowed its currency to float, a de facto devaluation, after the visit of an IMF delegation in January.

- Zambia is discussing with the IMF, which is demanding reductions in subsidies.

Opposition to such measures is usually behind the scenes. The only recent exception has been Nigeria. The Nigerian chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Tunde Idiagbon, said recently that the conditions given by the IMF were unacceptable, and declared, "I don't like the International Monetary Fund both in principle and practice." He said that Nigeria would continue to negotiate until the IMF agreed with the terms of the Nigerian government.

Tanzanian President Nyerere, speaking in London, said that Africa's debt burden was "intolerable," and that African countries need time and resources to emerge from their crisis. "It is not a rhetorical question when I ask, should we let our people starve so that we can pay our debts? . . . Repaying debts is a matter of honor. . . . But before you can pay, you have to live."