

Paris meeting told: Africa faces worst holocaust ever

by Mary Lalevée

At the opening ceremony of the 11th ministerial session of the United Nations World Food Council (WFC), ministers from 36 countries and delegates from most nations heard an impassioned speech from the outgoing head of the U.N. body, Eugene F. Whelan. He warned that "the worst holocaust the world has ever seen" would take place in Africa unless policies were drastically changed. "We knew, and we did nothing," to prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths from famine in Africa, he said. Departing from his prepared text, Whelan called for the cancellation of half of Africa's debt, and a five year moratorium on the rest.

Whelan said, "I feel that those organizations, institutions, measures, methods, proposals, and resolutions designed to eradicate hunger, to which I have been party to for many years, have failed us. I, for one, find it appalling therefore, in 1985, to be living side by side with preventable death."

"Yes, we knew well in advance that a major food problem had developed in Africa," but nothing was done until the tragedy in Ethiopia was brought into the homes of TV viewers in the West. "In spite of early warnings sounded again in 1984, it was the power of television that moved the public to force governments—both in Africa and elsewhere—to a response that initially at least, was inadequate. The public was not prepared to tolerate what it saw. As one result, the famine operation came too late, and its reach was too short to prevent the trek for food and the specter of death. There was lack of adequate organization and coordination within the international community that prevented a quick and adequate response from governments. But, *there was no lack of knowledge* about the seriousness of the African food and development crisis! Satellite scans had made the picture very clear."

Whelan went on, "In fact, African agricultural development policies and external assistance policies were not sufficiently altered and changed following the famine in 1973-1974 in the Sahel region. We *collectively* missed the oppor-

tunity of avoiding famine today—10 years later, and I am party to that failure. Policies must be changed or famine will reoccur in Africa—and let there be no doubt about it."

Whelan called for a doubling of external assistance for food and agriculture in Africa, and for changes in domestic policy in Africa, to benefit the poorest people. He appealed to all donors to provide logistical support to ensure the efficient distribution of food. "Are we prepared to see people die and measure this tragedy against financial voids which we *can* afford to fill?"

Indirectly attacking the International Monetary Fund and international banks, he said, "Pervasive and persistent poverty still smothers the hopes of millions upon millions of our fellow men—and not just in Africa—but everywhere people lack the opportunity to earn their daily calorie needs. We must not finance the repayment of international debts and the costs of trade protectionism on the backs of the world's poor."

At a ministerial meeting organized by the German Foundation for International Development (DSE) last Jan. 26, Whelan had spoken of the challenge of maintaining the confidence that hunger can and must be eradicated in our lifetime, and of finding innovative ways to do so. The report by the DSE says he rejected the Malthusian notion that mass hunger was inescapable, referring to the conclusions of the tenth ministerial session of the WFC in Addis Abeba in June 1984, in which ministers stated that: ". . . hunger can no longer be blamed solely on humankind's inability to produce enough food for all; hunger today is largely a man-made phenomenon. Human error or neglect creates it, human complacency perpetuates it, and human resolve can eradicate it."

He called Africa's famine crisis the "result of the failure of the entire international community to recognize the problem in time and act in time."

At the Paris meeting, the debt issue was also stressed by Edouard Saouma, the director general of the U.N. Food and

Agriculture Organization (FAO), in his opening remarks, when he called for "measures to solve the debt problems of developing countries."

Tanzania's President Julius Nyerere pointed out recently that Africa is paying \$10 billion annually in debt service alone, a sum vastly more than the amount of aid going into Africa; a sum mentioned by Whelan was \$3 billion last year. A WFC official at a press briefing mentioned that there is a \$1 billion a year fall in net investment in Africa, with \$8 billion going in during 1983 and only \$2.7 billion projected for 1986.

Some of the U.N. officials at the meeting were privately not at all happy about the fact that African representatives refused to accept the Malthusian argument that population growth was responsible for famine. One such official told *EIR*, "The population problem is a sensitive issue . . . for political reasons the Africans refuse to pay enough attention to it. The African population will double by the year 2000!"

In contrast to other U.N. bodies, the WFC places much less emphasis on the so-called "population problem." In a pamphlet published in May 1985, to the question, "What have been the causes of Africa's mounting food problems and recent famines?" the WFC answers:

"Africa's food problem is not solely the result of the recent drought. . . . There are other basic underlying factors at the heart of Africa's food crisis.

"External financial shocks and worsening trade prospects have brought many African economies to a virtual standstill. Some African export commodities have seen their international market value drop by 30-50% in recent years.

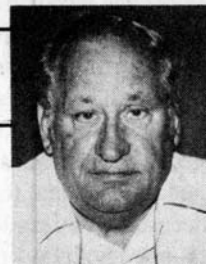
"In addition, many African countries are seriously underdeveloped, with serious shortages of skilled manpower and basic infrastructure. . . .

"Finally, observers point to the relatively low priority assigned by African governments in the 1960s and early 1970s to agricultural development and to national food policies as a basic, underlying cause of the present crisis."

Further on, the WF states, "The most practical and ultimately the most beneficial way of solving the world food problem is to support the development of low-income food-deficit countries, so they can either grow the food they need, or have the means for importing it."

The American position in the conference was: Free enterprise is the solution. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture John Block attacked "government interference that disrupts market forces." "Many developing countries would profit greatly from reforms that reduce the government's role and attract private sector participation into agricultural extension, research and the distribution of inputs to farmers." He described the American government's policy of selective help—only helping those countries which agree to undertake reforms; "Entitled 'Food for Progress,' this new initiative would provide 500,000 metric tons of commodities a year over the next five years to selected recipient countries."

Interview: Eugene Whelan



'They put a dollar sign on human lives'

The following interview with the Hon. Eugene F. Whelan, former head of the United Nations World Food Council (1983-85), former Minister of Agriculture of Canada was conducted by Mary Lalevée in Paris, June 14, 1985, following the four-day ministerial meeting of the World Food Council, June 10-13, 1985.

EIR: You said in your opening remarks, that unless something is done, Africa is facing the worst holocaust that man has ever seen. What does that mean for the World Food Council and its policies, because the WFC was set up to prevent this kind of disaster from ever happening again, and here it is unfolding in front of our eyes. What's gone wrong?

Whelan: Well, I think the World Food Council should admit that it's failed, the same as most U.N. agencies have failed. The ones that are the oldest are the biggest failures. The FAO, for instance, is a disaster, as far as I'm concerned. It must have been obvious to you what they were doing at the World Food Council. They were organizing a system that would not be the one that was intended, in the first instance: that is, one that looked after the criteria that it's set out for them to look after with these people in the U.N. In very rough farm terminology, you'd say that it's set out for them to ride herd on them, make sure they don't go astray, make sure they do the things that they're supposed to. And if they do ride herd, in the proper fashion, and if one of them goes astray, you're to bring them back, you're not to be all cuddly and nice with these organizations, just cooperate and work with them, you're to be at arm's length with those organizations, you watch them, you report what's going on directly to the United Nations.

I'm just saying that when we see this terrible tragedy, it is difficult for me to understand, in 1985, how that could even be allowed to happen. We call ourselves civilized! We're the most barbaric group of people in the world, especially those countries—and a lot of them have done that—which said "Look, our deficit is big, we can't afford this kind of thing. We have to lower our deficit, and until then you either live or die." In essence what we do is put a money sign—in my country, we would say a dollar sign—on the one who can