



Interview: Rafkin Skaf

'Controlling locusts just costs too much'

Rafkin Skaf, senior officer, U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, Emergency Locust Control Center, Rome, was interviewed Sept. 5 by Marjorie Mazel Hecht, managing editor of Fusion magazine. Mr. Skaf, an entomologist, has been with the FAO for 21 years. Here are excerpts of his interview.

Hecht: Will the big planes used in Senegal, sponsored by the U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, be used to spray in the rest of the Sahel area?

Skaf: I think there is an approach that this will work in Burkina Faso, but it has not yet been decided.

Hecht: Who has to decide?

Skaf: Mainly, the government of Burkina Faso has to request assistance from the United States.

Hecht: What would make these countries hesitate to ask for

these big planes?

Skaf: When you use a big plane, you must have a large area to cover. And this would consume large quantities of pesticide. The type of infestation of grasshoppers does not always necessarily require large spraying. In most cases it's scattered infestations. You may have high densities in some spots, but not to justify large-scale spraying. It would be really not economical. . . .

Hecht: But my understanding from FAO figures is that the infestation is large-scale in that country and also in Mali and Mauritania.

Skaf: You have one area between Mauritania and northern Mali and eastern Senegal, in that triangle, that is infested in some spots. But when you undertake large-scale control covering hundreds of thousands of hectares, of course, you reduce the numbers of the population, but you cannot avoid further breeding coming from surrounding areas, which again breed and enter the controlled area, so you will need a further effort. . . . Also, you have a lot of parasites which are naturally in all this vast area, and they will be stricken in any large-scale operation.

Hecht: Why are you worried about the parasites?

Skaf: Normally, there is a large natural mortality of the population while it is breeding, so any resulting population after such spraying would be devoid of parasites.

Hecht: I still don't understand why you wouldn't spray the large areas to see if you could really begin to eliminate the grasshoppers or the locusts? Is it a money question?

Skaf: When you spray large areas, you need all this equipment, and you have to use large quantities of pesticide. But if you spray only where you have large concentrations, you save a lot. But, of course, in order to concentrate the control on these limited areas, you need a lot of monitoring and you need a lot of smaller aircraft. This [monitoring] was not the case at the beginning, and this I think is behind the U.S. recommendation to quickly use the large aircraft. Economically, it would have been of course better if you have smaller aircraft to spray only where you have large concentrations.

Hecht:

aircraft are just a fraction of the cost of all the small aircraft. The more grasshoppers you eliminate this year, the less problem you have next year. So I would think that you would want a maximum effort now so that you do not have to do this again on a large scale.

Skaf: It's complicated. We want to take advantage of this year to assess the result of the campaign, because it's never been done on such a large scale.

Hecht: I can't understand that, because in the United States they spray routinely about 13 million acres, just for grasshopper control. There is no plague.

Skaf: You do it regularly, and this is what we want to avoid, not to make it systematically every year. Controlling on a large scale, we are afraid that you would kill a lot of parasites and the economical equilibrium that you have would be destroyed.

Hecht: That is not the case in the United States. . . .

Skaf: Are you sure that they are spraying all of the areas? The grasslands?

Hecht: Yes, they are spraying the grasslands; they are spraying the areas where the grasshoppers multiply. I don't understand why you would not choose to do the same thing.

Skaf: Because here the infestations in the Sahel are not regular. They depend every year on the rain. And the last time we had a large infestation was in 1974-75. And for 10 years we have not had a substantial program except in a small area. So for 10 years there was no real problem, then suddenly we have this problem. So why would we repeat this effort every year? These are countries which cannot afford to do that. It is not possible to make it a yearly exercise, and I don't think that it would be a good exercise.

Hecht: But you are saying two different things. You are saying that it is not possible economically to control the area every year, but this year, when you have an emergency situ-

ation, you are still choosing not to do the large-scale spraying with big planes, because you are afraid of wiping out the parasite population. That does not make sense to me.

Skaf: The point is to avoid using large quantities of pesticides and to concentrate the campaign on the highest infested zones. This will reduce a lot of your operations.

Hecht: What is the reason you don't want to use a lot of pesticide?

Skaf: Who is paying for the pesticide? None is paid for by the countries, except maybe this large-scale operation in Senegal.

Hecht: Senegal paid for the pesticide. So the only reason you are saying that you do not want to use pesticides is that it costs too much.

Skaf: Well, they cost too much per unit area and basically these operations should be sensible. We think that spraying large-scale zones, hundreds of thousands of hectares, when you need just smaller areas, would not be sensible. Now the question of parasites is another consideration. When you kill a lot of parasites the next generation will be relatively free of parasites. I mean that's also a theory. . . .

Hecht: I still cannot believe that the large-scale spraying would not be the best way to approach the problem in a year of emergency. It doesn't explain to me, except for the money reason, why you wouldn't spray more widely. The FAO is saying that we cannot do it because it costs too much and therefore we are doing something smaller.

Skaf: There are two approaches, two or more solutions, in every approach. We have opted for that one . . . that is, of course, to protect the crops. The other approach is the large scale and I think both can be defended. . . .

Hecht: How much more money would the FAO need to do the whole job, the right way?

Skaf: It depends on the problem you have to solve now in various countries. We don't have now a problem requiring immediately a solution of the type you are suggesting.

Hecht: Is the Soviet Union helping in this campaign?

Skaf: The Soviet Union is not helping in this campaign.

Hecht: Have you asked them for help?

Skaf: We didn't, in fact, because they are not a member of the FAO. At the August donors meeting they were not invited.

Hecht: So there has been no request for their help?

Skaf: We don't know if the governments have themselves requested their assistance, but FAO has not ever.