

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Bush cuts off food aid to Sudan

Still reeling from the effects of the 1984-85 famine, Sudan is now being denied the most basic means of survival.

On Oct. 2, the United States government ordered a ship to alter its course en route to Africa. The ship was carrying 45,000 tons of wheat destined for Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Under the desperate circumstances of food shortages in the region, this order is tantamount to genocide.

The Bush administration is using food as a weapon in its Mideast war policy. Bush denied food to starving Sudanese because Sudan's President, Gen. Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir, has sided with Iraq against Bush and Thatcher's wishes. As of mid-October, European food donors have also denied food to Sudan in deference to Bush's dictates. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, previous sources of financing for Sudan, have also cut off aid.

The situation is one of the gravest hunger crises anywhere in the world. U.S. Ambassador to Sudan James R. Cheek said, "The obstacles to be overcome here actually loom far more formidable than anything we ever faced in Ethiopia. Literally millions of people are at risk."

Cheek, who served as senior U.S. diplomat in Ethiopia in 1984-85, was referring to the combined effects then of the famine in Ethiopia, and the cholera epidemic which swept through 22 African nations.

The region has never recovered. Today, hundreds of thousands are desperate for food. This crop season, the rains came either too little or too late. The lack of rain has forced 10,000 people to move from Obeid, a provincial center where food is normally plentiful, to the outskirts of Khartoum. This autumn, food riots occurred in Baha-

nusa, south of Obeid.

The United Nations September report on global food crops and shortages reported that exceptional and emergency food assistance was required for Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, along with logistical assistance.

The U.N. estimated that for the past year, Sudan had an import requirement of 460,000 tons of cereal grains, none of which might be expected to come from commercial purchases, and only 318,400 tons of which had been shipped or committed to be shipped before the recent interruption.

There was a poor 1989 harvest in Sudan, which resulted in food supply problems in drought-prone western regions of Darfur and Kordofan. Prices of millet and sorghum shot up from 1989 to 1990 in local markets.

In the south, a U.N.-related rescue mission called Operation Lifeline Sudan II had been in effect, until Bush's intervention. Pledges of food aid from international donor nations, in the range of 100,000 tons, had been made, to help narrow the "donations gap." Some of this food aid was already delivered as of September this year. However, now the remaining food flows may be stopped.

The government had set a target for planting 7.5 million hectares of sorghum and millet this year, but in view of the rainfall problems, it is unlikely that this goal will be met, despite replanting. The coarse grain harvest occurs from November to December in Sudan, and the winter wheat harvest will take place around next March. None of the prospects are good.

The geography of Sudan—soils,

climate, and rainfall patterns—ranks it as potentially one of the world's richest breadbasket areas, if simple water and land improvements were made. Agronomists report that all of Africa could be fed from the fertile Sudanese prairies, if properly developed.

Engineering plans were completed for constructing a canal to serve as a straight channel for the upper White Nile, which rises in southern Sudan. This is a fabulously rich agricultural area, once the marshland is drained.

French construction crews started on the project, called the Yonglei Canal. However, after being almost one-third of the way finished, the project was shut down by pressure from the anti-development World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and environmentalist lobby. The wildlife advocates insisted that the canal would ruin the marshy habitat for swamp life. Now Bush is prepared to kill off the human population.

The Bush administration is throwing up a curtain of excuses for its genocide edict in terms of Sudan's being in arrears on debt payments to the international banking community. Since the famine of 1984 in Sudan and Ethiopia, Sudan has been unable to meet the bankers' demands. In September, the IMF declared Sudan a "non-cooperative member."

In addition, Washington officials are making excuses for Bush's decision in terms of accusations that President al-Bashir is disrupting the arrival of food to needy people in southern Sudan, in order to thwart rebels in the region. Al-Bashir, who came to power in a coup 14 months ago, denies that he is preventing flows of food, though he, in turn, accuses some church organizations and others of contributing arms and assistance to rebels who have been active in the southern areas for seven years.