

Agriculture by Marcia Merry

Iraq has no food reserves

George Bush and John Major talk of Saddam Hussein's secret food reserves, but even the USDA admits Iraq has no grain.

They will probably make it through August, but they are definitely headed for big trouble later in the year," was the evaluation of Iraq's food supply situation by John Parker, the Iraq specialist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), quoted in a widely circulated Knight-Ridder Financial News wire in July.

This is also the evaluation of the London-based World Wheat Council and other grain trade experts. Yet, at the very same time that these reports were being made known, the White House and 10 Downing Street were proclaiming the view that Iraq had secret food reserves, or that it had the means to readily acquire food.

If this baseless view is allowed to prevail, and food is not made available to Iraq, then the death toll from malnutrition and hunger will be far greater than from bombing—even without the lethal effects of bad water, disease, and lack of electric power.

The facts of the Iraq grain situation are readily available from the USDA and the Rome-based U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, which continuously monitor world food supplies. In addition, June is the last month of the world "wheat year," and in July, the World Wheat Council issued estimates of the Iraq wheat crop, wheat import needs, and recent consumption trends. Estimates of all these sources directly counter the White House suggestions that secret food stockpiles may exist in Iraq.

George Bush repeatedly made snide remarks about secret food stores in Iraq during the week of July 22,

when the U.N. was to vote on lifting sanctions—a vote now put off until late August.

In recent years, a good wheat harvest in Iraq is around 1 million tons, which is substantially less than one-third of the country's annual requirements of 3.5 million tons of wheat. Therefore, yearly wheat imports into the country have averaged over 2 million tons, to meet annual consumption and carryover needs.

The International Wheat Council (IWC) estimates that this summer's wheat harvest in Iraq was 1 million tons. But this follows depletion of wheat stocks in the country, and destruction of storage facilities. Last year, in the 1990-91 period (now ended as of June), Iraq produced only 800,000 tons of wheat, and, because of the embargo, imported only 500,000 tons. Though in the year prior to that (1989-90), Iraq imported 3.4 million tons of wheat, this is long gone.

"Bumper Harvest Won't Feed Iraq," was the headline of a front-page story in the July 15 *Agweek*, a weekly farm news journal published in North Dakota, part of the wheat belt. The story, based on the Knight-Ridder wire report, states: "The experts say reports about Iraq's wheat crop this year are confusing, with some suggesting the wheat yield in the northern Dohuk area may have been above average because of heavy rainfall in March. . . . But the experts say a 1 million ton crop, if it materializes, won't be enough to satisfy the country's needs. Even if it is a bumper crop, let us say, 1.1 million tons of

wheat, it will not be enough."

The *Agweek* story reports that sources in Amman, Jordan, the base from which Iraq is negotiating grain imports, say that Baghdad had signed a deal to buy 1 million tons of Australian wheat and 500,000 tons of Canadian wheat earlier this year. But Canadian and Australian officials have not confirmed this, although the IWC says that it was told June 20 that 100,000 tons of Australian wheat were sold to Iraq.

Iraq has petitioned the U.N. for permission to sell \$1.5 billion worth of crude oil in order to buy food and medicine, but so far there has been no response. Iraqi assets abroad are frozen, so grain import deals based on payments from these assets are stalled.

Despite the horrors of the bombing, Iraq's population mobilized to bring in this summer's wheat harvest. The wheat belt is in the north—whose bright green growth was visible on American television screens when the TV networks showed footage of U.S. troops in northern Iraq in March and April. At harvest time, non-farm people went to this region to help bring in the crop.

But besides the need for more grain, there is also an acute shortage of heavy equipment, fuel, and storage capacity to move and handle the grain.

In early July, the British daily the *Independent* reported that the "hard-nosed" position of the United States and the United Kingdom against food for Iraq was causing consternation even in the U.N. Security Council, and was feeding a backlash in Britain. Several British Members of Parliament have been lobbying the Foreign Office to ease sanctions against food, since they were briefed July 9 by Unicef on the malnutrition in Iraq. In late July, French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas also stated that some way must be found to get food into Iraq.