

'No-Rain, No Crops, No Food'

AGENCIES FEED MILLIONS IN DROUGHT

News Analysis by
Religious News Service

U.S. religious relief agencies are in the vanguard of an expanding international race to prevent starvation in six nations on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert in West Africa.

As many as 1 million persons are starving and another 22 million are affected as the region faces one of the most severe droughts in modern history.

The six countries — Chad, Niger, Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta and Mauritania — have vast arid regions where periodic droughts are common.

Crops failed for the seventh consecutive year. Thousands of refugees from northern areas of the six countries began streaming into cities in the south, calling attention to the fact that areas once suitable for people, livestock and crops are now literally part of the great desert.

The first U.S. relief agency to respond to the disaster was Catholic Relief Services, the only U.S. church organization with a food program already in the region. CRS initiated a food program in Senegal and Mauritania in 1961. Upper Volta has been added, and in early June CRS began a study of famine needs in Mali, Niger and Chad.

Church World Service, the relief agency of the National Council of Churches, maintained a well-drilling operation in Niger before the current crisis became intense. In May it set up a drought emergency task force, dispatched a fact-finder to Niamey, Niger's capital and rushed high protein supplies.

The World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals has launched a major fund drive; Lutheran World Relief is studying the situation, according to a spokesman.

More than a dozen black organizations, including the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), are conducting a campaign to inform Americans about the famine. The Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy, a Baptist who represents the District of Columbia in Congress, has announced a movement to mobilize Americans, especially those of black churches, in supporting relief campaigns.

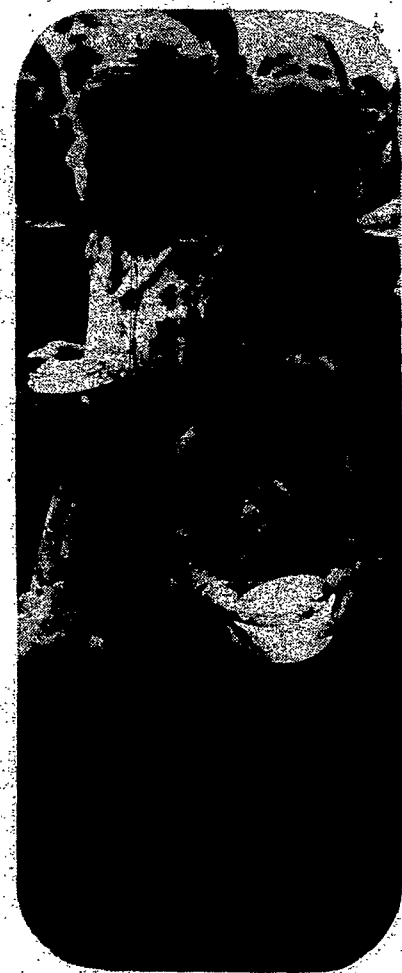
Mr. Fauntroy is among those who complain that both governmental and private efforts to date are both inadequate and too slow.

The Food and Agricultural organization of the U.N. first called attention to the drought in March. The fact that it was late June and July before religious groups began to make public appeals for relief funds may seem slow.

However, in that interim period supplies were being sent from many lands. At one point in June, the major problem was transportation of foodstuffs within the countries, rather than a shortage of goods.



Women set out on the search for water, above, across the parched landscape of Upper Volta, where a drought is in its sixth year. Famine from crop failure, right, shows on the faces of the girls of Poona, India, as they eat relief rations in an area hit by drought and 150 degree temperatures.



A fleet of planes was operating by mid-July, making it possible better to handle food and medicine. The U.S. loaned three aircraft; France sent 12, West Germany nine, Belgium six and Canada three.

Emergency relief is the pressing need. Wells and rivers are drying up, and 40 to 80 per cent of the cattle and livestock are dead.

But long-range concerns must also be faced. What if no rain comes? Where will the former nomadic and agricultural tribes go if they can never return to their now parched homelands? The challenges to the world community are staggering. The problem is too big to be handled apart from international planning.

Pope Paul was among the first religious leaders to recognize the gravity of the situation. In late May, he urged all Catholics to make the "greatest possible commitment" to help the starving populations.

The pontiff went further. He noted that the magnitude of the disaster requires the "mobilization of all the world's wealthier nations" to tackle the problem.

It was through Catholic Relief Services that the European Economic Community contributed 2,000 tons of powdered milk for Upper Volta on June 1.

There was no milk available from the U.S. government or through the World Food Program. The reduction of grain supplies in the U.S. has made it impossible for U.S. AID to give as much wheat and barley as otherwise might be sent.

Massive control and development of available water supplies is perhaps as crucial as emergency food, according to Donald Kurtz, sent to Niger by Church World Service.

The once mighty Niger River, Mr. Kurtz reported in late June, "has been shrunk to a stream," so shallow a man can wade across it with the water never reaching above his waist.

As people and animals are pushed south from the encroaching Sahara, grasslands and water are being destroyed, he

continued. Grave health problems are created as once nomadic people shift from a diet of milk and meat to millet and sorghum.

"An infectious scale is contaminating the date palm," Mr. Kurtz said, noting that the scale can be controlled by importing and releasing a type of ladybug. A French institute is working on that problem, but needs both money and personnel, he added.

Despite the gigantic need and all that is being done by governments and churches, the African famine has not spurred as much citizen concern in America as did relief needs in Nigeria in the late 1960s and Bangladesh two years ago. Relief experts have privately suggested several reasons for the sluggish response.

First, the plight of the people in the six countries is not a result of war. There are no dramatic conflicts reported daily in the press.

Second, many people do not know where Niger, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Upper Volta and Senegal are. Famine in an "unknown" area sounds like just another unfortunate event in a long series of emergencies.

Relief appeals have become frequent in recent years.

"I tell people I meet in local parishes about the sub-Sahara famine," said one leading

American churchman. "They say 'Where is that?' They are tired of relief appeals."

Education on the enormity of the famine has been a major element of the program of U.S. relief agencies. And as the relief commission of the National Association of Evangelicals said, the situation in the six countries is "urgent."



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