

An Advancing Desert Brings Death in Africa

The dreadful six-year drought that has brought death and desolation to six countries south of the Sahara Desert continues to spread with the inexorability of a Greek tragedy.

Originally confined to the six nations of the Sahel — Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Upper Volta — the drought has moved into southern Sudan and Ethiopia.

Experts estimate that nearly one-third of the 66 million persons who live in this 4,000-mile band from the Atlantic to the Red Sea are threatened with starvation.

So wasted is the land, they fear, and so slight the prospect of a bountiful harvest, that not even a good rainfall this season can end the horror.

Visitors to the area are visibly shaken by what they see: emaciated adults, children with distended bellies, filthy refugee camps where overcrowding has triggered epidemics of measles, influenza, and cholera.

David Smithers, deputy director of Christian Aid, the relief agency of the British Council of Churches, who recently returned from a tour of the Sahel, reported that the situation is rapidly deteriorating.

He said he had never seen such suffering and human deprivation on such a scale before, and warned that the worst was yet to come.

Visiting villages was like witnessing a re-creation of wartime pictures of the Nazi concentration camp at Belsen, he added — "matchstick limbs, the swollen bellies of starving children and old people, the withered breasts of young mothers with no milk for their dying babies; ulcers and sores, pus and phlegm of diseases gripping bodies too weak and malnourished to resist."

"Nothing within living memory compares with the present situation," Smithers declared, "where over 100,000 people and between 4 to 5 million cattle are reported to have perished."

He warned that, now, with no more rains expected until late summer and with only minimal harvests this year, "thousands more people may die unless massive extra aid can be mobilized in time."

The drought is advancing southward. The usually lush tropical forests of the northern Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and Dahomey have received so little rain that their coffee and cocoa crops are far below normal. Nigeria's peanut harvest has been cut by two-thirds.

In southern Sudan, according to a report of the Sudan Council of Churches, "several thousand persons in Bahr el Gazal



A scene from a camp in the Upper Volta: there has been nothing like this "within living memory," one churchman says.

province are being severely affected by a lack of rainfall. Many persons have sold their cattle and eaten next year's seed grain.

There are reports — amid charges and counter-charges of administration ineptitude by Ethiopian officials — that last year, between 50,000 and 100,000 people died of starvation and related diseases in the northern provinces of Ethiopia.

The actual number may never be known, says Kerry Lovering of the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), "but we anticipate a far worse situation this year than in 1973."

An Ethiopian government survey team has indicated that the drought is now threatening the southern provinces of the nation — a particularly ominous development, as the south is Ethiopia's "breadbasket."

Almost daily, the Ethiopian government reports new pockets of drought and famine. Shoa province was thought to be receiving sufficient rain. A recent government study, however, found that nearly 12,000 Shoans have died of starvation.

Early this year, a Norwegian church relief team came upon a small settlement in Sidamo-Borana province that was deserted except for 62 rotting corpses, all victims of famine.

Ironically, in the parched Harar province, four days of torrential down-pours last March swelled the Awash River to 14 feet above its normal level, flooding thousands of huts, killing dozens of peasants, and washing away tons of topsoil.

In 1973, the international community, secular and church-related, provided over \$150-million in food grains, transporting subsidies, cargo aircraft,

children's food, and drugs to the Sahel, according to Martin Walker, a Manchester Guardian columnist specializing in Africa.

The massive relief effort, coordinated by the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), he said, staved off a human tragedy of wider proportions, "although there were pockets of starvation, outbreaks of cholera, and an almost total breakdown of the region's ecological balance."

Relief agencies of various Churches — including the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian — as well as the World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals, were in the vanguard of this international effort.

But, says an FAO official in Niamey, capital of Niger, "1974 is going to make 1973 look like the horn of plenty," and even more effort will be required.

Soliciting of money and supplies and getting the supplies to Africa are only parts of the problem, relief officials have observed.

Incompetence, corruption, and greed, they have noted, prevent much of the aid from moving expeditiously to the interior where it is needed.

In Mali, for example, according to an FAO report, some local authorities, instead of distributing donated grain at no cost, sold it to merchants, who then resold it at an enormous profit to their starving countrymen.

In Ethiopia, some truckers have refused to transport aid supplies, preferring to haul other goods for higher rates.

U.N. Secretary General Kurt

Waldheim has pointed out that the drought area's backwardness and inaccessibility also impede distribution. Even local air transport had been hindered by sandstorms and unusable airstrips, damaged or destroyed by heavy aircraft landings on previous food deliveries, he said.

And even when the grain and food stuffs are stock-piled at major distribution points, he noted, they become easy prey for thieves, locusts, bush rats, and the quela quela birds, which can consume twice their weight in food daily.

Still another problem faces the leaders of the relief agencies if they try to airlift emergency supplies this year: a 500% jump in the price of airplane fuel in Africa.

Emergency relief may buy time for Ethiopia, some experts believe, enabling its new government to make the investments necessary to avoid future famines.

The World Council of Churches (WCC), which, in 1972, was instrumental in negotiating a peace between factions in a long and bitter civil war in southern Sudan, has inaugurated a multi-million dollar program in village building, water development, medical work and self-help in the area.

But the prognosis for the six Sahelian nations in the semi-arid zone south of the Sahara is not at all encouraging.

Even though the leaders of the six French-speaking nations have formed a committee that prepared a \$700 million list of 123 development projects, including hydroelectric dams, deep wells, and reforestation programs, the Sahel's chances of survival are uncertain.

The Sahel drought, says the Manchester Guardian's Walker, "seems to be a part of a climatic tragedy which stretches at the same line of latitude around the earth from Nicaragua, through West Africa, through the Wallo region of Ethiopia, and into India's Maharashtra Province."

In addition, the Sahara Desert has been steadily creeping southward for the last six years "at the rate of 30 miles per year," according to a recent study.

If this is the result of a basic change in weather patterns, then, as a British meteorologist was reported as saying, "all mankind's efforts to halt the desert encroachment of the Sahel will be futile."

About 25 million people live in the Sahelia region, the size of continental United States.

Some concerned experts have begun to wonder: will the Sahel countries — before too long — disappear beneath the desert sands?