

Religious Leaders Warn:**Food Crisis Beginning to Emerge**

As 26 high-level American religious leaders made an eloquent appeal for strong Congressional support for U.S. development aid to the world's needy, the spectre of a global food crisis was beginning to emerge from the shadows.



Figures released by the United Nations in June of this year showed that per-capita food production in most developing countries declined in 1977, extending a trend of eroding agricultural productivity that has continued for several years.

Even among the developed countries, according to the World Food Council (WFC), the top U.N. agency monitoring the global food situation, food production grew only slightly — at a rate well below that considered necessary to keep up with population growth.

And meanwhile, with the inexorable movement of a Greek tragedy, more and more of the earth's fertile top-soil is turning into barren, desert-like wasteland in a phenomenon — due in large measure to human misuse of the land — known as "desertification."

Spurred by concern over these, and allied, problems of global scope, the 26 Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Jewish representatives met with President Carter on the eve of a House of Representatives' vote on foreign-assistance legislation to express their support for U. S. development aid to the poor around the world.

"It is of the essence of the Biblical faith which we share," said the representatives in a joint statement, "that the religious community stand with those who are the poorest and most vulnerable members of society . . ."

"As prophets spoke in behalf of the orphans and widows, so we must address ourselves to the needs of those throughout the globe who live in conditions of absolute poverty, deprived of basic nutrition . . ."

Urging Congress to hold the line against efforts to cut back funding levels for aid and development overseas, the religious leaders insisted that America had a grave moral responsibility, as a member of the international community, to do its part to aid "the poorest members" of "a single human family."

Earlier, Lutheran World Relief (LWR), the overseas aid and development agency of the four major Lutheran Churches in the U. S., made a similar plea for generous Congressional action on foreign assistance.

"A hungry world" said a LWR resolution, "calls for action in keeping with the humanitarian traditions of the United States and the moral conscience of its citizens, considerations which coincide with its enlightened self-interest."

World hunger is such an overriding issue today, according to the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. (Southern), that the denomination has decided to gear up to make the issue a "top priority concern" for a second decade.

The American religious community's renewed expressions of concern for the world's undernourished and ill-fed comes at a time when a lag in world food output — exacerbated by growing desertification — is raising fears of food shortages of massive proportions.

Many more people in developing countries are vulnerable to a food shortage than ever before, according to figures released recently by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The estimated number of people facing chronic malnutrition has risen in the past six years from 400 million to 455 million, said an FAO report.

The World Food Council, in its June report, warned that a new global food crisis may be imminent unless widespread adverse weather conditions improve and significantly more food reserves are produced and distributed.

During the 1970's said the WFC, food production in both developed and developing countries has been growing at a slower pace — 2.4 per cent a year — than during the 1960's, when it rose 2.8 per cent a year.

Four per cent is the rate of increase that experts think would be necessary for major progress in eradicating hunger and malnutrition.



Drawing by Ben Sahn

The U.N. food agency said that progress has been slowest in African countries, where food-production increases during 1970's have fallen to 1.3 per cent a year, half the pace of the previous decade and about half the rate at which the population is increasing on that continent.

A drought has returned to plague the Sahel — the southern shore of Africa's great desert sea, the Sahara — which in 1968-1973 was the scene of one of the worst droughts and famines in modern history. A disastrous desert locust outbreak has hit famine-ridden parts of Ethiopia, and sections of Somalia and the Sudan.

Abnormal food shortages have developed in many other African countries as well as in Afghanistan, Indonesia, Laos, Lebanon, Nepal, and Vietnam.

The slowdown of agricultural progress in developing countries is attributed to several factors, including bad weather, wars, disarray in government agricultural development programs, and declining levels of aid from developed nations.

And all the while, deserts have been on the march in various parts of the world, including a land area of over 1 million square miles in 12 western states of the USA.

"The main support of human life lies in the 14 inches of fertile soil that covers the earth," says ecology expert Bonnie Barrett Stretch. "But each year, desertification — the deterioration of fertile soil to desert-like barrenness — destroys 14 million acres of fertile land."

"In the next 25 years," Ms. Stretch writes in the July, 1978, issue of Maryknoll, the magazine of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, "researchers estimate (that) one-third of the world's fertile land will be rendered barren unless something is done now to prevent it."

"The human dimension" of the desertification phenomenon, Ms. Stretch points out, "is revealed in the gaunt faces and swollen bellies of starving populations. It is manifested in cultures breaking apart, in the destruction of families and the disintegration of communities . . . In the last seven or eight years, more than 50 million persons have had their lives disrupted from the effects of deteriorating soil."

Aware of the growing phenomenon, the United Nations sponsored an international conference in Nairobi, Kenya, last year, on a "Plan of Action to Combat Desertification."

The major revelation of the extensive research documents prepared for the conference was that desertification is largely a man-made catastrophe.

"At least 50 million people live in areas that are

slowly turning to desert because of humanity's abuse of the land," said a conference report.

It is not droughts and it is not a possible long-range weather change that immediately spreads deserts, the report declared. It is bad land management and pressure to produce more food to meet human population growth.

"Erosion, deforestation, and, in mismanaged irrigation systems, a buildup of salts in the soil mark the transformation of usable land into desert," the report emphasized.

Discussing, later, the desertification problem in areas of the Great Plains in the U. S. — "the breadbasket of the world" — Dr. Jack D. Johnson, Director of the Office of Arid Land Studies at the University of Arizona, said the "real villain" of the piece is not desertification itself. "That," he said, "is the symptom. The main problem is man and specifically his misuse of these lands."

"We have a tendency to blame changes in the weather for the problem," he added, "but it's really man's activities that are responsible."

Dr. Johnson indicted indifference, ignorance, commercialism, and greedy land developers for contributing to the growing problems afflicting the arid lands in the U.S.

"We must recognize that we have to live within the confines of nature and demand less from it," he said. "We must develop our land in a way consistent with sound environmental practices."

Some religious leaders see a Biblical mandate to do just that.

Economist Albert Widjaja, a Mennonite pastor and a former executive secretary of the Indonesian Council of Churches told a recent Mennonite World Conference that mankind had completely failed the divine injunction to "replenish the earth."

"Indeed, in the midst of plenty," said Dr. Widjaja, "our modern world is actually heading towards destitution, resources depletion, and world hunger."

He called on Mennonites to "witness to our governments and societies by challenging their policies which may be unjust, exploitive, and destructive to other people and our environment."

"From a Christian missionary point of view," says Father Darryl L. Hunt, M.M., managing editor of Maryknoll magazine, "God's mandate to Adam is still our inheritance. 'See, I give you all the seed-bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit; this shall be your fruit.'"

"This generation, perhaps more than any which preceded it, will be accountable for the stewardship of the land."