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COMMENT

What Now for the Sahel?

*by Joseph C. Kennedy, Ph.D.**

The author surveys the terrible losses, both human and economic, which were caused by the seven years of drought in the West African Sahel region and the advances made since the drought. The article notes the inadequacy of foreign aid relief funds which have been allocated to the region by the developed world. Much of the article is based upon the author's first-hand observations made during his numerous visits to the Sahel. He notes the great potential of the region and gives special emphasis to the prospects of future water resource development. The author concludes with a call to the developed countries to provide the long term assistance necessary to eliminate the effects of the drought and to prevent such hardships from recurring.

FOR NEARLY seven years the 25 million people who live on the edge of the Sahara desert in the West African countries of Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta, Niger and Chad experienced one of the worst extended droughts known to modern man.

At the height of that drought (1973-74) water tables had dropped as much as twenty-five feet; village wells and nomadic transit wells had run dry.¹ In places one could walk across the mighty Niger River. In countries where 90% of the people live off the land and where livestock is the major source of income, the land had become parched and dry, the grasslands withered.² Nearly 10 million people faced death from starvation.³

Through the emergency assistance provided by the world community, mass starvation was averted. Over twenty-three nations—the United States, Canada, England, France, West Germany, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Saudia Arabia, and other African countries—became involved, along with dozens of American private groups such as the American Friends Service, Africare, Catholic Relief, Care, and Church World Service. Though mass starvation

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¹S. DIARRA, THE DROUGHT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN COUNTRIES OF THE SAHEL 3 (1973).

²E. BERG, THE RECENT ECONOMIC EVOLUTION OF THE SAHEL 6 (1975).

³STAFF OF HOUSE COMM. ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 94th Cong., 2d Sess., U.S. DEVELOPMENT AID PROGRAMS IN WEST AFRICA 34 (Comm. Print 1976) [hereinafter cited as AID PROGRAMS].

was averted, when the drought came to an end in 1975⁴ the economic and human losses had been staggering.

At least half a million people had died from starvation and related diseases.⁵ Twenty-one million head of livestock, nearly half of the total herd in the Sahel, also died.⁶ Thousands of sedentary farmers were forced to settle in refugee camps along with millions of nomadic cattle herders who not only lost all they had, but perhaps lost, forever, their way of life. Thousands of children who did survive will always carry the debilitating effects of severe malnutrition in infancy. Though there had been droughts in the past, old men and women in the villages of the Sahel could not remember their parents ever mentioning a calamity of such magnitude.

For one who had traveled throughout Mali, Upper Volta, Niger, and Chad at the worst of the drought, and then returned in 1975-76, the significance of the Sahelian saying "Water is life" was highly dramatized. Most of the camps which had sheltered and fed hundreds of thousands of refugees had disappeared. At Lazare, only a few miles outside the capital of Niamey, Niger, the refugee camp was totally gone. The sedentary people had returned to their villages while many of the nomadic Touareges and Peul had rejoined other family members who had managed to save some of their livestock.

Two years before, at the huge base camp in Agadez, 600 miles north of Niamey, giant C-130 cargo planes loaded with emergency food supplies had landed. Long lines of refugees had formed each morning to have their names checked against the carefully prepared roster, which gave family name and number in the family to determine how many cups of sugar, sorghum, and powdered milk would be received. Now only scattered refugee tents remained. In Niger and Mali schemes were underway to resettle the nomads who became destitute in the camps.

Forty miles northwest of the city of Agadez, the potentially agriculturally rich Irhazer Valley stretches nearly 400 miles long and 150

⁴The rains actually began in late 1974. By 1975, although the rainfall was about normal, there were still large pockets of drought in the Sahel. Further, the drought had spread across to the Sudan and Ethiopia. In 1976, the government of Niger had to request emergency food assistance because of the irregularity of the rains, and in 1977 the government of Upper Volta asked for worldwide emergency food assistance as a result of irregular rains.

⁵AID PROGRAMS at 34; N.Y. Times, Sept. 7, 1977, at A12, col. 1.

⁶U.S.A.I.D., SAHEL RECOVERY AND REHABILITATION PROGRAM—MALI, at II-A-6 (1974) [hereinafter cited as SAHEL RECOVERY].

miles wide. Throughout this valley there is deep unexploited underground artesian water. Nearly twenty years ago, when Niger was still a colony, the French, in search of uranium, dug test holes as deep as 600 feet across much of the valley. They did not find uranium, but they did strike the artesian water flow.⁷ However, in view of the fact that the search was not for water, these holes were plugged with cement, covered, and forgotten. With the shifting sands, over time, these sites literally disappeared from the face of the desert.

In 1974, the government of Niger became determined to relocate these test holes; but maps and records indicating their exact location were not available. The word went out across the desert to nomads: help locate these sites; and with an amazing memory, which could come only from those whose life and death is dependent upon an intimate knowledge of subtle changes in a seemingly unchanging desert, the Touareges began to locate the sites.

Now the holes are being developed into modern deep-bore wells and centrifugal pumps for irrigation are being installed. It is around these wells that the nomads are being given land and are being resettled. Each family has prepared the fields and planted crops. Where two years ago there was nothing but barren valley, today there are fields of maize, millet, sorghum, and black-eyed peas. In the future the program will be expanded to give these families a few goats and sheep.

In Mali, seventy miles south of the fabled Timbaktu, in the region of Goundam, is one of those great paradoxes of the Sahara. There in the middle of the desert, surrounded by the kind of white sand which once made Jones Beach famous, is the tremendous Lake Fagibouine. There, not far from the shores of the lake in the town of Tin-Aicha, a nomadic resettlement scheme got underway in early 1975. When the lake recedes during the dry season, each family plants crops on the ten hectares of land given them. They have been given livestock, and health and educational facilities are being added.

This program is to be expanded to include another village. With the return of the rains, other changes were also noticeable. At Tiggirwit in the Irhazer Valley, it appeared as if a miracle had been wrought. A few years ago an international organization built a quarter-mile long dam, or barrage, to hold back and store the water in the flat lands. Shortly after its completion the drought set in and the dam was considered a failure. Standing on top of the dam in March of 1974, nothing could be seen but the flat, barren expanse.

⁷MINISTÈRE FRANÇAIS DE L'INFORMATION, *LE NIGER EN MARCHÉ* 31 (1968).

Two years later, standing there again, one could see a lake stretching to the horizon. The dam did work, and water was being pumped from the lake over the dam to the fields where resettled nomads were farming.

Although 21 million head of livestock had perished during the drought, once again cattle could be seen grazing and moving to markets.⁸ The bleached white bones, formerly found on the plains or near watering points, were no longer present. The farmers were in the fields again. The child-care centers of the hospitals were no longer filled with dozens of infants with the distended bellies or shrivelled-up bodies, the most marked signs of extreme or fatal malnutrition. It seemed that just as the lack of rain had brought futility and death, so the coming of the rains had begun to restore hope and life.

With the ending of the drought though, the people of the Sahel face another danger—the danger that the major rich countries of the world will return to their attitude and behavior of neglect toward the Sahel, which existed until 1973, and then was changed only by the specter of 10 million, men, women and children dying from starvation.

Long before the drought, the Sahelian countries were already among the twenty poorest and the ten hungriest nations in the entire world,⁹ with a per capita income of less than \$70 per year, and with some of the highest infant mortality rates and shortest life expectancies.¹⁰ Not long after gaining independence from the French in the early 1960's, these countries were written off by the developed world as having no great natural resources, no military or strategic value, and no large populations for potential markets. The Sahelian nations were considered to be poor countries lacking the potential to become viable nations.

It was the acceptance of this position which prompted the United States Government to contribute \$120 million to the six Sahelian countries during the ten year period, 1962-1972.¹¹ By contrast, in response to the drought, within an eighteen month period during 1973-1974, over \$130 million in assistance was provided, primarily through the

⁸SAHEL RECOVERY, *supra* note 6, at II-A-6.

⁹E. BERG, *supra* note 2, at 5. See also United Nations Conference on Desertification, Processes and Causes of Desertification (Provisional Agenda Item 4) at 6, U.N. Doc. A/CONF. 74/1 (1977).

¹⁰U.N. Conference on Desertification, *supra* note 9, at 6.

¹¹U.S.A.I.D., U.S. OVERSEAS LOANS AND GRANTS AND ASSISTANCE FROM INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS 75-76 (1972) (prepared for House Committee on Foreign Affairs).

Agency for International Development.¹² (Current AID projections call for \$30 million to be spent on programs while \$50 million will be allocated for long term development).¹³

Though the drought has ended, the struggle for survival goes on. A few years of world emergency relief has done little to alter the conditions of life for the many who live at subsistence levels in rural areas. The problems of inadequate water supplies, low food production, poor health, chronic malnutrition, and many others still remain.

With many of the wealthy countries of the world facing food and energy shortages for the first time, there is already a growing acceptance of the view that, since there isn't enough for everybody anyway, it is a waste of resources—a prolonging of the misery as it were—for the “have” countries to continue to share their limited resources with the “have not” countries. Given this attitude it is not difficult to foresee the developed nations of the world, once again, turning away from the 25 million people of the Sahel.

There is the parallel danger that the American public, foundations, corporations, and individuals, long conditioned to respond only to emergencies, will conclude there is no longer a need to aid the Sahelian countries, or, if there is a need, the problems of recovery and restoration are so immense that only the massive resources of governments and super-organizations can make a difference.

It is true that there are recovery and restoration programs which can be undertaken, but only through massive multinational assistance—programs such as the Senegal River Basin Project, a forty-year three billion dollar irrigation, transportation, hydroelectric scheme which will dramatically affect Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania;¹⁴ or the onchocerciasis (river blindness) program which is a twenty-year, \$120 million program covering Mali, Niger, Upper Volta, Togo, Benin, Ghana and the Ivory Coast.¹⁵ There are programs which run into the millions of dollars: the USAID \$15 million Seed Multiplication Program, the I.D.A. (World Bank) \$7.5 million rural roads program, and the \$3.5 million Tara/Africare Irrigated Agricultural Program. It is

¹²AID PROGRAMS, *supra* note 3, at 35.

¹³U.S.A.I.D., FISCAL YEAR 1978: SUBMISSION TO THE CONGRESS: AFRICA PROGRAMS 285 (1977).

¹⁴AID PROGRAMS, *supra* note 3, at 33.

¹⁵*First Year Costs Funded For Control of River Blindness*, NEWS OF THE WORLD BANK GROUP, May-June 1974, at 1; INT'L BANK FOR RECONSTRUCTION & DEVELOPMENT, GRAND STRATEGY AGAINST RIVER BLINDNESS 3 (1973).

true, also, that the leaders of the Sahel called for a billion dollar "Marshall Plan" recovery-restoration program.

Still, there are many needs of the people which can be met without huge outlays of money—programs which, while complementing the massive projects, often have a more immediate (and sometimes lasting) effect on the farmer in the field, the mother, the child, the very poorest than do many of the gigantic long term projects.

In the Irhazer Valley, for example, where at first glance the desert is being made to blossom, one farmer's corn is four feet high. Next to it, corn planted at the same time is only two feet high. One farmer planted his corn in rows on mounds. The other planted his corn in rows also, but on flat land where the settling of the water prevents root aeration and stunts growth. One or two more agricultural extension agents or an agronomist on loan might have prevented this, and, at the same time, greatly enhanced the acceptance of a program the Niger government deems vital for the nation's social and economic recovery.

In another area in the valley, although ten hectares of land is under cultivation, perhaps a third of the crop will die simply because the centrifugal pump which was installed does not have the power to draw enough water to irrigate the total surface area.

In Upper Volta, two hundred miles north of the capital of Ouagadougou in the village of Seguenega, the people are subsistence farmers. Two years ago some of the villagers and the youth who belonged to the "Four C" clubs (*coeur, corps, cerveau, coopération*) undertook a small reforestation program. Not only are trees needed to hold back the encroachment of the desert, but wood is the major source of fuel for cooking. In Ouagadougou, a family spends more money to buy wood to cook their food than they do for the food itself. Due to the drought there was little water in the village, and hundreds of people were forced to leave. The scheme had to be abandoned.

The idea behind the reforestation project had been to plant neem trees, and then, alongside the trees, to plant vegetables. For a three-year period, as the trees grew, they would provide the shade necessary to protect the vegetables from the intense sun. After the third or fourth year some of the trees would be cut for fire wood, and other trees would be planted. In the meantime, the people would have an immediate supply of vegetables for eating or for selling.

Now only a few isolated trees remain from this project. However, the well construction, reforestation, and vegetable gardening project is

an extremely viable program which can have a dramatic effect on the lives of the people in Seguenega.

The Banamba Region in central Mali is far from the Sahara Desert and the lands of the nomadic cattle herders who were so severely hit by the drought, yet the 90,000 people in the area have suffered immensely. A shortage of water is the greatest problem; entering the small village of Kondo is like landing on the moon. All over the village there are depressions and then hills of dirt. Everywhere there are abandoned holes, *puisards* or hand-dug holes. In search of water the villagers dig a hole ten or twenty feet deep. They usually do not strike water though, because they don't have the tools and blasting equipment needed to dig through the hard rock layer and reach the plentiful water below. If they do find water, the hole dries up after a short period of time. So they dig another hole, and another, and another. There is no adequate water well in the entire village of 900 people. With donkey carts the women go eight miles to the next village to fetch drinking water with which they also cook and wash clothes. At the only well in the village, the women gather early, arriving at five in the morning, to wait for the water to come, and by noon there is some water in the well. The women are able to draw out three large pails of brackish, dark water, and then the well runs dry again until the next day.

Throughout the Sahel, in thousands of villages, these situations are repeated. Some problems are small. Some are large. Most can be solved or eliminated, though few without financial and technical assistance from the world community. The greatest tragedy of the Sahel, perhaps even greater than the tragedy of the drought itself, is that the 25 million people who live in an area the size of the United States do not have to be poor or hungry.

The Sahel has the potential to grow enough food to feed all of its people and many others as well. There is an abundance of water deep beneath the sands of the desert and the savannah—enough to make the desert blossom.¹⁶ Additionally, the area is fed by four large river basins. Along the Niger River, which begins in Guinea, winding its way nearly 2,600 miles through Mali and Niger, and emptying through Nigeria into the Gulf of Guinea, there are millions of acres of land which are virtually unused due to the uncontrolled flooding of the river. In the country of Niger alone, there are over 100,000 acres of

¹⁶INT'L DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE, HIDDEN WATER IN ARID LANDS 7 (1974).

land along the river, which, if cultivated and double-cropped, would not only meet the food needs of Niger but would provide a surplus for export.

There is land, there is water, and there are proud people who have the will and the ability to improve the conditions of life for themselves and, especially, for their children. The question is, now that the rains have come to the Sahel, and now that the emergency has passed along with the heart-rending pictures of emaciated, dying women and children, does the world community have the will, politically and morally, to provide the kind of long term assistance which will enable the people of the Sahel to restore their land and their lives, and also enable them to master the harshness and uncertainties of the Sahel so that they need never experience again the tragedies of the past seven years?