U.S. USES FOOD TO WHIP FOES IN LINE

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MAPUTO—If several million people face starvation in one country, but there is an enormous surplus of grain in a neighboring country, what is the solution?

Most people would instinctively answer: take the grain from the food surplus country and distribute it to the food deficit country.

But in Africa matters are not that simple. The two countries in question are Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In Mozambique, 3.9 million people are facing drastic food shortages, due principally to the disruption of agriculture caused by the South African-backed counterrevolutionary force, the Mozambique National Resistance (see Guardian, Oct. 1).

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But right next door in Zimbabwe there is a growing mountain of surplus grain (mostly corn). Zimbabwean warehouses currently store two million tons and farmers are bringing in more. Storing grain is an expensive business, and some of it is inevitably spoiled or eaten by rats and other pests.

The Mozambican government has urgently appealed for a minimum of 208,000 tons of grain. So why can't Zimbabwe just send its neighbor a tenth of its grain mountain? There is no political difficulty: the two countries are firm allies. They are both frontline states and members of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), and Zimbabwean troops fight alongside the Mozambican army against the MNR in central Mozambique. So why cannot corn be transferred from overflowing Zimbabwean warehouses to empty Mozambican stomachs?

The problem, quite simply, is money. Mozambique is virtually bankrupt, and does not possess the hard currency to buy Zimbabwe's corn, while Zimbabwe cannot afford to give much of it away.

Solving this difficulty would require aid donors to spend their money in Zimbabwe, purchasing the surplus grain and sending it by rail into Mozambique. But the major donors have no intention of doing this: the U.S. and the European Economic Community want instead to dump their own grain surpluses on hungry African countries.

Hence the absurd situation whereby U.S. grain is shipped halfway around the world to Mozambican ports and presented as an act of altruism, while Zimbabwe is unable to move its grain surplus a few hundred miles by rail. So exactly who is the U.S. aid actually aiding? Hungry Mozambicans or U.S. farmers?

Not all Western countries play the aid game as cynically as the U.S. administration. Thus Austria and Australia are prepared to move some of Zimbabwe's grain to food deficit countries. The Australian scheme is to swap its wheat for Zimbabwean corn, which is then used in the Australian aid program (urban Zimbabweans have acquired a taste for bread, but the country does not grow wheat). However, the Australians will acquire less than 30,000 tons of Zimbabwean corn.

The Zimbabweans are justly angry at the situation. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund habitually lecture African countries to give priority to their agriculture. Zimbabwe has done just that, and has paid farmers well for their crops. Both the peasant farmers and the large-scale, mainly white commercial farmers are successful. As a result Zimbabwe is one of the few African countries that generates a food surplus—and now it finds that it cannot sell it.

One absurdity leads to the next. Now the Zimbabwean government, on a hungry continent, is planning to reduce grain production. The Minister of Lands, Agriculture and Rural Resettlement, Moven Mahachi, panicked at the size of the grain surplus and at the end of September introduced measures to penalize farmers who overproduce.

Currently farmers are paid $108 per ton for their corn, which they are obliged to sell to the Grain Marketing Board. Mahachi said that next year any farmers selling the board more than 50% of the grain that they sold this year would receive only $60 a ton. The farmers claim this is less than the costs of production.

Only small producers, defined as those who sold the board 20 tons or less this year, are exempt from the measure. Mahachi justified this attempt to slash grain production by half by saying that the country was running out of storage space and that the financial losses involved in the grain mountain were becoming unacceptable. He suggested that farmers switch to other crops, such as oilseeds.

Naturally, the Grain Producers Association has protested vigorously, in defense of its members' financial interests. It has pointed to the dangers of "fire brigade exercises that tamper with the production base, particularly in relation to our national food staple, [corn]." But the association does not know what to do with the surplus—its suggestions such as feeding it to livestock or adopting a "dynamic and positive approach to marketing" are downright feeble.

It seems that African states, whether their agriculture flourishes or fails, cannot win. For the international trade in grain is dominated by heavily subsidized European and U.S. farmers, whose governments manipulate food crises to insure that it stays that way. The last thing the Reagan administration wants is for the African continent to become self-sufficient in food. ■