

UN food summit ends in fiasco

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Last week's four-day meeting of the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in Italy ended in a fiasco after it was essentially boycotted by the wealthy countries of North America and the European Union.

According to the FAO, an estimated 815 million people around the world face chronic hunger and undernourishment. Some 777 million of these are in the so-called developing world. One person dies every four seconds as a direct or indirect result of malnutrition. Fifty-five percent of the 12 million children who die yearly are victims of malnutrition.

Within the context of chronic worldwide hunger, the specter of mass starvation looms in sub-Saharan Africa, where 12.8 million people in six countries are at risk of death from starvation because of famine, drought and floods. The concentration of millions of AIDS victims in rural areas of these countries is devastating farming areas and worsening the food shortages.

Faced with this human disaster, however, the only Western leaders who came to the FAO meeting in Rome were the prime minister of the host country, Silvio Berlusconi, and Jose Maria Aznar of Spain, the country that presently holds the European Union's rotating presidency. While 181 countries were represented, 74 by heads of state or government, only Berlusconi and Aznar attended from the wealthy countries.

The US and most other members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, including Germany, France, Denmark and Canada, were represented in Rome by agriculture ministers. Britain was even more contemptuous, sending a junior minister rather than the cabinet member who runs the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The virtual boycott of the FAO meeting was made all the more obvious by the fact these same governments were represented by their top leaders at a NATO

meeting, also held in Rome, only two weeks earlier.

The provocative snub of the FAO meeting by all the major powers was their way of signaling their rejection of the call for more direct agricultural development aid from the West. The FAO has said an additional \$24 billion in such assistance is needed to fight malnutrition and starvation. FAO Director General Jacques Diouf, pointing to the absentees, said, "We have a good indication of the political priority that is given to the tragedy of hunger."

By staying away from Rome, top US officials also avoided dealing with the criticism of the recently enacted farm bill in Washington, which increases subsidies to huge agribusinesses by \$18 billion annually. While touting "free trade," the US government arrogates to itself the right to dump US agricultural exports in the poorest countries, wiping out the livelihoods of tens if not hundreds of millions in Africa and elsewhere.

The last FAO summit took place in 1996, and ended with a pledge to cut world hunger in half by the year 2015. Nearly one-third of the way toward that date, the official figures show that little or no progress is being made.

Some officials tried to claim that a drop in the number of hungry and malnourished of about six million a year in the past six years showed progress. This figure must jump to 22 million a year if the original goal is to be met, however. At current rates, 122 million people will die from hunger-related diseases by 2015.

Even assuming a modest drop in hunger in the last few years, the bulk of the reduction has taken place in China, where rapid economic growth has reportedly cut the number of hungry by 76 million. In most countries, including more than two-thirds of 99 Third World nations studied by the FAO, hunger has increased over the past decade.

Malnutrition has grown in the Congo, India, Tanzania, North Korea, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Kenya and Iraq, among other countries. If China is not included, world malnutrition has actually risen since 1996.

The situation is most dire in the countries of Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Lesotho, where starvation for millions is imminent. In Zambia, for instance, some 2.3 million people need food assistance between now and March 2003. An FAO report stated that “all the classic signs of acute social stress are evident” in the country. “People are turning to desperate measures, including eating potentially poisonous wild foods, stealing crops and prostitution, to get enough for their families to eat.”

HIV infection in Africa introduces a double-barreled threat. With levels of infection reaching 20-30 percent in most of these countries, the highest rates in the world, millions of people are weakened by illness just when food supplies are running out. Death rates are already significantly higher than would be expected from AIDS itself.

In Lesotho, the rate of HIV infection is about 26.5 percent, and 35 percent among adults. In Malawi more than 70 percent of the population does not have enough food. In Mozambique, severe flooding in 2000 and 2001 has been followed by drought in 2002.

The brazenness of the Western boycott in the face of this suffering points to a fundamental reversal of policy that has taken place over the last two decades. The United Nations and its affiliated agencies, at least in the first three decades after the Second World War, attempted to mitigate economic conflicts between the major imperialist powers and the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Development aid was doled out and bourgeois nationalist regimes were propped up.

Today this has given way to the complete subordination of every national economy to the demands of Western capital, enforced by the International Monetary Fund. As Clare Short, Britain’s international development secretary, bluntly explained, “I’m not sending a minister because I don’t expect it to be an effective summit.” The FAO is “an old-fashioned UN organization and it needs improvement,” she added. “The FAO needs to tighten up its act.”

The message is clear: there can be no “old-fashioned” aid as in the past. Short echoes the call for “reform” of

the UN bureaucracy that has been spearheaded by Republican and Democratic administrations in Washington. The major imperialist powers, which have always called the shots at United Nations headquarters, are now making it clear that nothing will be allowed to interfere with the profit interests of global capitalism.

If the world leaders didn’t show up at the food summit, it’s because their business is defending profits, not fighting hunger. In the case of the US, the Bush administration found a way to use the discussion on hunger to advance the interests of US big business. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, leading the American delegation, came with a very specific purpose in mind—securing approval for genetically modified crops. The FAO meeting endorsed research into these crops, thus handing a major victory to huge US biotechnology firms.

The root cause of world hunger is not inadequate food supplies. Food shortages go hand in hand with food surpluses under capitalism. This situation applies to the US as well as the poorest countries. The US grows 40 percent more food than it needs, but hunger is widespread and 26 million people in America rely on food stamp assistance. India has a record surplus of 59 million tons of grain, but almost half of Indian children are undernourished.



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