

Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

Locust plague hits Brazil

An ecological holocaust of biblical proportions—assisted by the International Monetary Fund—is threatening the Americas.

The millennial plague of locusts, infallible symptom of ecological holocaust throughout world history, is out of control in Brazil. This plague is the direct result of economic looting imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on Brazilian agriculture.

The IMF-mandated policy of exporting food, and the crazy program of using 10 million acres of the country's most fertile and mechanized land for producing sugar cane for conversion into fuel alcohol, has forced Brazil's food producers to migrate randomly into other zones where there is a serious lack of adequate infrastructure.

A Ministry of Agriculture specialist told the magazine *Istoé* that the locusts "prefer the open fields. . . . Therefore, the destruction of the forests has created a perfect habitat for the locusts, which now have abundant space and food to multiply in."

The affected areas are located in the states of Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Rondonia. Locusts are beginning to appear as well in the state of Goias, which now has 17 afflicted municipalities. In Mato Grosso, the most seriously infested state, the plague is covering an area of 72 million acres, affecting primarily sugar cane and rice crops.

"To tell the truth, in this area, the advance of the insects is irreversible—that is, if no climatological changes occur. In short, we are facing a plague," was the conclusion reached by two specialists on locusts, from France's International Center for Co-

operation in Agronomic Research for Development.

The French agricultural research center, together with Brazilian specialists, has just concluded an inspection tour of the area in Brazil where the locusts have already devoured tons of grain.

The current locust plague began in Mato Grosso in 1984. At that time, the infected area was 14.4 million acres which, if compared to the present 72 million acres, leaves no doubt that the situation is "in crisis," as the specialists are now describing it.

Significantly, the date on which the problem began coincides with the time that the first major burnings of forest were ordered "to expand the agricultural frontier," a euphemism that the World Bank uses to force nations to restrict investments in agricultural infrastructure, and opt for the "cheaper" path of slash-and-burn for their forests.

Efforts to eradicate the insects (or rather, palliatives applied in the name of eradication by dusting them with insecticides while in flight), have left the Mato Grosso totally vulnerable to the next infestation, when the locusts' eggs hatch. It is reckoned that by November of this year, billions of locust eggs currently buried in the state's 2.4 million acres of rice and 108,000 acres of sugar cane, will hatch.

This locust horde is of a different species from the 23 that have existed heretofore in Brazil.

To confront this new species of infestation will require investment in biological research, in addition to new

eradication efforts. Thus far, it has been determined that the new variety of locust measures approximately 1.6 inches in its adult form, and forms vast elongated clouds. One such cloud observed in Mato Grosso measured 1.6 miles long.

Such a cloud of insects is estimated to weigh 100 tons, and consumes its weight in grain each day. Further, it travels at the rate of 94 miles a day. Each female produces an average of 100 eggs between October and November, which hatch in November-December.

Despite the dimensions of the threat, the Locust Eradication Program created last year by the Brazilian Agriculture Ministry does not have sufficient resources to carry out the kind of advanced technology program required. Use of satellites for detection of infested areas, and eradication efforts while the locusts are still in their first stages, must accompany eradication of the ravaging locust clouds in the air.

Thus far, the program has allocated \$1 million to eliminate the plague, which is considered a drop in the bucket by experts in comparison, say, to the amount the creditor banks are demanding Brazil hand over as a "symbolic payment" of its overdue back interest.

As far as help from international agencies is concerned, that too has been virtually nil. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has limited itself to sending technical experts to Brazil, to conduct bureaucratic inspection tours, continuing the same genocidal behavior it carried out in Africa last year. In 1986, a vast locust plague plunged Africa into catastrophe when, for the first time in this century, four different varieties of locusts attacked tons of food simultaneously.