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## □ A GREEN FAMINE IN AFRICA?

*By Ambassador Tony P. Hall, U.S. Mission to the U.N. Agencies for Food and Agriculture*

*Countries facing famine must consider the severe, immediate consequences of rejecting food aid that may contain biotechnology, writes Tony Hall, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Agencies for Food and Agriculture. Southern African countries that faced severe food shortages in late-2002 and rejected U.S. food aid, risked the lives of millions of their people. The rejected food, he writes, is the same food people in the United States eat and has undergone rigorous food safety and environmental impact testing.*

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Last year and the first few months of 2003, Southern Africa was on the verge of a catastrophe. It was on the brink of famine and is not out of the woods yet. The United States Government did everything we could to stop it and, for the most part, we were successful. The causes were, and remain, varied: drought, a rampant HIV/AIDS epidemic that orphans millions and failed governments prepared to play the politics of hunger. Some governments even blocked the delivery of emergency food relief needed to head off starvation. Their excuse was derived from the ongoing debate over biotechnology, spurred in part by certain European bias against biotechnology.

Last October, I went to visit Zimbabwe and Malawi, two of the six nations affected by the crisis. As the newly arrived U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture, I had to see this crisis first hand. After almost 24 years of fighting hunger as a U.S. Congressman, however, I had a good idea of what famine looked like. I visited hospitals, feeding centers and schools. I saw many malnourished people — mostly children — and when I asked these children “when is the last time you ate?” most replied that it had been two days, and some said five or six days. Hospitals were overflowing with children they struggled to keep alive. This is another result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has created almost one million orphans in Zimbabwe alone, and perhaps 800,000 in Malawi, with no means of support or sustenance.

U.S. and international experts agreed that the worsening food crisis in southern Africa placed as many as 14.5 million people at risk. These people did not have enough food then and most do not have enough today. Hunger continues to haunt many of their days. Even though we

have done much to assist, they are in different stages of starvation. The situation in Zimbabwe is still headed for major disaster. Zambia could have been even worse.

In 2001, the U. S. Famine Early Warning System (FEWSNET) identified the onset of drought and food shortages. By February 2002, the United States was moving emergency relief into the region with the World Food Program (WFP). In southern Africa, more than 350 thousand metric tons of U.S. food aid had been delivered by November and another 150 thousand metric tons were delivered in the following three months. This still represented only half the food the region needed. But food that should have gotten into Zimbabwe and Zambia with ease was stuck outside these countries, while debate raged inside over the human health and environmental risks posed by the maize millions of Americans eat daily.

Moreover, the Zambian government decided to reject the maize the U.S. had donated. More than 15,000 tons of U.S. maize had to be removed from the country by WFP at a cost of almost \$1 million. There were riots when some hungry Zambian citizens learned of their government’s plan and some of the food eventually made it back into the country through the black market.

It doesn’t take a lot to calculate the impact of these debates, carried out by well-fed experts. As the region headed for famine, vulnerable people perished. While the U.S. respects the rights of countries to make their own decisions about biotechnology, we have no other option but to provide the food we consume ourselves. And other donors simply could not have increased their donations to fill the gap had more U.S. food aid been rejected.

The United States provides between one-half and two-thirds of the food aid needed to meet emergencies around the world. All of this food comes from our own stocks and markets. It is the same food we eat. It is the same food we feed our children. Maize is the staple food of southern Africa and U.S. maize is about one-third biotech. All of the food donated by the United States has passed our rigorous food safety and environmental impact testing. In fact, it is eaten daily and has been for years by millions of Americans, Canadians and South Africans, and millions of other people all over the world. We have the most rigorous food safety testing system in the world. For

this reason, U.S. biotech and non-biotech foods are mixed together. We do not, and see no need to separate them.

At the request of Secretary General Kofi Annan, the World Food Program, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) issued a joint policy on biotechnology in the summer of 2002. It stated that, based on all scientific evidence, genetically modified (GM)/biotech foods now marketed present no known risk to human health. The European Commission also issued a public statement in August 2002, which agreed that there was no evidence that genetically modified maize varieties are harmful. Even strong biotech opponents such as Greenpeace belatedly recommended that African countries accept GM maize as an alternative to starvation.

But years of anti-biotech lobbying, demands for a “precautionary principle” that no amount of science can satisfy, and a mistrustful climate provide a ready excuse. This climate is fostered in part by some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to capitalize on repeated scares over food safety regulations in Europe that have nothing to do with biotech.

When I was in Zimbabwe and Malawi, nobody asked me about the safety of biotech food. Nobody. Starving people, of course, simply want to be fed. But civil servants in the governments of Zimbabwe and Malawi did not ask, nor NGO relief workers, nor anyone else. It is vitally important that the countries and the international community carefully consider new and emerging issues such as biotechnology. But it is also important that we realize that our actions, or our inactions, have consequences. People can die, they did die and they will die.

The United States remains ready to help. Leaders in affected countries are, of course, free to choose whether to accept that help. But as Gro Brundtland, former head of the World Health Organization stressed, they must consider the severe, immediate consequences of rejecting food aid that is made available for millions of people so desperately in need. Time could run out. □