

## A BILLIONAIRE'S FEAR

The Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme are the great and beautiful legacy of Josué de Castro. Both were born, as I have described, out of the tremendous awakening of conscience that seized Europe in the aftermath of fascism, the FAO in 1946 and the WFP in 1963. Today, these two institutions lie in ruins.

The WFP enjoys less sumptuous offices than the FAO. Its world headquarters is located in a rather drab suburb of Rome, adjacent to a cemetery, some vacant lots, and a ceramics factory. Nonetheless, the WFP is the most powerful humanitarian organization in the world—and one of the most effective. The WFP's mission is to provide emergency humanitarian aid. In 2010, the list of recipients of WFP aid included nearly 90 million hungry men, women, and children. The WFP currently employs slightly more than ten thousand people, 90 percent of whom work in the field with the victims of hunger.

Within the UN system, the WFP enjoys great independence. It is directed by an administrative council comprising representatives of thirty-six UN member states. One member state, the United States, provides about 60 percent of the contributions to the WFP. Over the decades, American contributions have been above all in kind; the United States has dumped its enormous

agricultural surpluses onto the WFP. However, times have changed. The American surpluses are melting away very rapidly, especially owing to the large-scale manufacture of biofuels, which is subsidized by billions of dollars in public funds. This is why, since 2005, in-kind contributions provided by Washington to the WFP have fallen by 80 percent. Yet the United States remains, by far, the leading contributor to the WFP in terms of monetary donations. European support is more reduced: in 2006, the UK donated \$835 million and Germany \$340 million, while France's contribution remains very low, \$67 million in 2005 and \$82 million in 2006.

In order to reduce transportation costs as much as possible, but also to avoid penalizing Southern farmers, the WFP tries very hard to buy food in countries as close as possible to hunger zones. In 2010, the WFP spent some \$1.5 billion on food. In 2009–10, WFP aid was devoted first and foremost to three specific populations: the victims of the floods in Pakistan, the drought in the Sahel, and the earthquake in Haiti. In 2010 as well, thousands of tons of corn, rice, wheat, and special foods for children under age two and for pregnant and nursing mothers were purchased in Argentina, Mexico, and Thailand, but also in Europe (mainly intravenous therapeutic nutrition products). On February 11, 2011, at a press conference held in Rome, Josette Sheeran, then the WFP's executive director, was able to confirm that in 2010, for the first time, the WFP bought more than 80 percent of its food in the southern hemisphere.

In the first chapter of this book, I outlined the clear distinction that the UN makes between structural hunger, which it is the FAO's mission to combat, and conjunctural hunger, which the WFP tries to reduce. This distinction must be made more nuanced in the context of the WFP's work.

According to its mission statement, the mandate of the WFP is very precise:

The policies governing the use of World Food Programme food aid must be oriented towards the objective of eradicating

hunger and poverty. The ultimate objective of food aid should be the elimination of the need for food aid. . . . Consistent with its mandate, which also reflects the principle of universality, WFP will continue to: use food aid to support economic and social development; meet refugee and other emergency food needs, and the associated logistics support; and promote world food security in accordance with the recommendations of the United Nations and FAO.

According to its mandate as originally defined by the UN General Assembly, the WFP must in particular reduce the toll of child mortality, improve the health of pregnant women, and fight against micronutrient deficiencies. This is why, beyond emergency food aid, the WFP provided, until 2009, school meals for 22 million children living in the poorest countries. However, most of these meals have recently been eliminated, for reasons that I discuss below.

The WFP was also the pioneer of a method of emergency intervention called Food for Assets (also called Food for Work), according to which victims of hunger who are able-bodied enough are hired by the WFP to work on the repair and reconstruction of damaged roads, bridges, irrigation canals, silos, schools, and hospitals, and on soil rehabilitation projects. In exchange for their labor, men and women who are heads of families are paid in kind: so many sacks of rice for so many days of work. Moreover, all the Food for Assets projects are conceived by local people themselves, and they are the ones who decide which projects will be started first.

The first time I saw a Work for Assets project under way, I was in the southern Caucasus, in Georgia. This magnificent and very ancient country has recently been torn apart by two civil wars. Immediately following the dismantling of the USSR in 1991, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two separatist regions of Georgia, declared independence (in 1992 and 1993, respectively). The Tbilisi government tried to crush the rebels. To escape the fighting, tens of thousands of refugees, including members of the

Georgian majorities of both regions, fled into Georgia. Given the stagnation that followed the collapse of the Soviet economy, Georgia did not have the means to feed and care for the refugees. The WFP took on the task, trying to do the least possible harm.

The two autonomous regions were ravaged. In both, the WFP financed the clearing and rehabilitation of tea plantations abandoned by farmers fleeing the fighting. In Georgia, refugee farmers were put to work by the WFP on large-scale construction projects and were paid not in cash but in sacks of rice, wheat, and powdered milk. Thanks to the WFP, for the last two decades, thousands of persecuted families, victims of the vast waves of "ethnic cleansing" that took place in the course of these two civil wars, have been able to feed themselves almost normally.

Since that time, I have seen Work for Assets in action on the arid plateau near Mek'ele, the capital of the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia, where nothing grows in the stony ground except a few wretched stalks of teff; also on the Yucatán sierra; in Guatemala; and on the steppe in Mongolia's Selenge province, on the edge of the vast Siberian taiga. Everywhere, I have been impressed by the eagerness with which entire families have joined in the program. Work for Assets transforms victims into makers of their own future, restores their dignity, helps to reconstruct badly damaged societies, and, in the WFP's own words (which I saw on a sign at a WFP jobsite in Rajshahi, Bangladesh), helps to turn hunger into hope.

The WFP also leads exemplary diplomatic campaigns. Like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the WFP expresses doubts about the effectiveness of so-called humanitarian corridors, the supposedly "neutral" zones that the UN seeks to create so that food can be transported from central depots to camps for displaced persons whom the UN is attempting to aid. The idea is, however, attractive: in open war, don't humanitarian corridors guarantee the free access of trucks bringing aid? Yet establishing the humanitarian corridors suggests to the warring parties that outside the corridors' perimeter, everything is permitted, including poisoning wells and fields, slaughtering livestock,

burning harvested food, destroying crops—all this, in defiance of the Geneva Conventions and other international norms governing the protection of civilians and the environment in wartime.

In western Sudan, in northern Kenya, in western Pakistan, in Afghanistan, armed gangs or soldiers periodically attack WFP trucks (as they do the vehicles of all the other emergency aid organizations). The cargos are stolen, the vehicles burned, the drivers sometimes killed. All the men and women working for the WFP (and for the ICRC, Action Against Hunger, Oxfam, and other NGOs in the same field) unquestionably deserve profound respect, for they risk their lives every day.

The WFP is a forbiddingly complex organization. It manages emergency food depots on five continents. When the prices of staple foods are low on world markets, the WFP stockpiles thousands of tons of reserve supplies. It maintains a fleet of five thousand trucks, with handpicked drivers.

In many countries, the WFP is compelled to resort to subcontractors, as in North Korea, for example, where the army holds a monopoly (and hence total control) over transportation. In other countries, only local haulers know the routes well enough—fraught as they are with hazards, potholes, side roads—to see that aid gets safely to its destination. This is especially true in Afghanistan.

The WFP's Logistics and Transport Service in Rome also maintains a fleet of aircraft. In South Sudan, hundreds of thousands of starving people live in areas inaccessible by road or river. Cargo jets must therefore airdrop crates of food, whose safe landing is ensured by parachutes. The WFP air fleet is famous within the UN. Many other UN departments make use of it, since it is renowned for the reliability of its aircraft and the acrobatic skills of its pilots. In western Sudan, for example, tens of thousands of soldiers and police officers from African Union member states (especially Rwanda and Nigeria) struggle to maintain security for the seventeen displaced-persons camps in the three provinces of Darfur where war is raging. Their actions are coordinated by

the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York (DPKO). But it was WFP jets that the DPKO used to transport the African Union troops and police officers to Darfur.

In Central and South Asia, in the Caribbean, in East and Central Africa, I have witnessed the WFP's emergency response programs. I have had numerous encounters with the programs' directors and those who work under them, who are all often truly exceptional people. My admiration for the WFP is rooted in such encounters.

Daly Belgasmi is a member of a Yemenite tribe that immigrated centuries ago to central Tunisia. Born in Sidi Bouzid (the city where the recent Tunisian revolution was born on December 17, 2010), Belgasmi is a man of volcanic temper and contagious joie de vivre, endowed with remarkable determination in a fight. Trained as a nutritionist, Belgasmi has battled for nearly thirty years against the demon of hunger. In 2002, Belgasmi was the WFP's director of operations in Islamabad. Famine was raging in south and central Afghanistan. Men, women, and children were dying by the thousands. In this period, the American high command twice bombed the WFP's main food depot in Kandahar and burned it down—a warehouse that was, moreover, clearly marked with the UN flag, and whose location had been duly communicated by the WFP offices in Rome to U.S. Air Force headquarters in its underground base in Colorado. But since southern Afghanistan, and especially Kandahar, was “infested” with Taliban fighters, the American generals feared that the WFP food might fall into their enemy's hands.

As the famine in Afghanistan became ever more deadly and the food blockade imposed by the American forces ever more impenetrable, Belgasmi made a decision. He assembled a convoy of thirty 25-ton WFP trucks in Peshawar loaded with rice and wheat, crates of powdered milk, and containers of water. To the American colonel who was his usual contact at the operational headquarters in Kabul, Belgasmi sent the following message: “Our trucks will cross into Afghan territory tomorrow morning around 7:00 A.M., coming through the Khyber Pass and taking

the road to Jalalabad. Please inform the air force operational command. I request, along the route whose coordinates are attached, until tomorrow evening at nightfall, a total cessation of bombing.”

At dawn on the appointed day, Belgasmi gave the signal to depart. The response from the American colonel did not reach him until the convoy of trucks was already past the Torkham Gate and traveling through Afghan territory. The colonel demanded that Belgasmi immediately cancel the trip. The WFP trucks continued to descend the winding mountain switchbacks on the road to Jalalabad. Belgasmi was seated in the cabin of the first truck.

Many years later, I learned about this incident directly from Jean-Jacques Graisse himself; Graisse is the WFP's senior deputy executive director and chief of operations and its leading light. I said, “But Daly could have died!” Laughing, Graisse replied, “Even worse, if he had lost even one truck, we would have fired him right away!”

Belgasmi is currently the WFP regional director for the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, based in Cairo. Like a lion, he fights almost every day against the Israeli officers in Karni, the crossing point for WFP aid convoys on the border between Israel and Gaza. Every truck that makes the crossing successfully and brings aid to the undernourished men, women, and children of Gaza constitutes for Belgasmi a personal victory.

Another extraordinary person I have met at the WFP is James T. Morris, who is not at all like the stereotypical Americans Europeans know—and love. Tall, heavysset, white-haired, a friendly giant, this midwesterner was dropped into the executive director's position of the WFP by his longtime friend President George W. Bush in 2002. A billionaire, Jim Morris was a successful businessman in Indianapolis. He had served in the Indianapolis city government, had worked for several not-for-profit organizations, and was a major contributor to Bush's presidential campaign. The White House owed Morris the job of his choice. Cabinet minister? Morris said no, he wanted to travel. Ambassador? Not important enough, to his way of thinking.

How about director of a big international organization—the WFP?

A quiet man and a loving grandfather, full of curiosity and a ferocious will to do good, Morris landed in Rome like an astronaut landing on the moon. He knew absolutely nothing about world hunger and the fight led by the WFP. Morris had barely assumed his duties when he embarked on a world tour, visiting eighty countries where the WFP is active. Morris visited dozens of Food for Assets worksites and hundreds of emergency nutrition centers where children are treated with intravenous nutrition therapy and, in most cases, slowly restored to life. He visited schools and kitchens where school meals are prepared; he studied the statistics on victims of hunger. He saw dying children, desperate mothers, and fathers with empty eyes.

And he was sorely troubled. I remember one expression he used over and over: “This cannot be. . . .”

Drawing on his formidable energy and his vast experience as a businessman who had built an empire, Morris threw himself into his work. Morris is a Christian, a member of the Episcopal Church. Right in the middle of his stories, I sometimes saw tears in his eyes. Rereading some of the letters that he sent me, I find words that perfectly sum up what moves him:

Dear Mr. Ziegler,

Thank you for all the good that you do. I appreciate your efforts on behalf of the world's poor and hungry. . . . So many people have need of us, it is so sad, above all for the little ones.

Good luck,

Jim

Or this, from another letter:

Every one of us must do all that we can for others, every day, whether they are near or far away from us. All I know is, the thing that unites us is our humanity. . . . It is impossible to

understand the great mystery of life. . . . There is so much to be done, so few of our efforts succeed.

A friendly relationship, with rather comic political consequences, grew up between Morris and me. It was Graisse who introduced us over lunch in the Port Gitana restaurant in Bellevue, on the lakeshore just north of Geneva. Morris had invited me as a special guest to the quadrennial WFP conference in June 2004 in Dublin. Every four years, in fact, the WFP gathers together all its regional directors to discuss proposed strategies for the organization.

The Josué de Castro era had ended decades ago, and no one at the WFP (or at the FAO) remembered the idea of a right to food any longer. Within the UN system, human rights had become the province of the Human Rights Council, not of the UN's specialized agencies. The WFP considered itself to be a humanitarian aid organization, period.

In Dublin, I pleaded on behalf of a normative, rights-based approach, and accordingly for structural economic and social changes. Belgasmi, Graisse, and Morris supported me. On June 10, the last day of the conference, Morris put to a vote a resolution “on the rights-based approach to hunger” stipulating that henceforth the realization of the right to food would constitute the strategic goal of the WFP.

Throughout this period, as I have explained, whenever I presented my semiannual reports and formulated my recommendations to the Human Rights Council in Geneva and to the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee (also known as the Third Committee) of the UN General Assembly in New York, the various American ambassadors would attack me virulently. They denied the very existence of any human right to food.

Summoning all his resources of energy and diplomatic skill, Morris, on the other hand, would from now on defend this right. And yet, as executive director of the WFP, Morris was regularly invited to appear before the UN Security Council to report on the world food situation. During his presentations, Morris twice

quoted me, referring to me as “my friend Jean Ziegler, whose political opinions I do not share.”

This situation in fact particularly perturbed Ambassador Warren W. Tichenor, George W. Bush’s special envoy in Geneva. Soon he no longer dared to come to meetings of the Human Rights Council. He sent instead his adjunct, the sinister Mark Storella, who, of course, continued to attack me. In the eyes of the American mission’s diplomats in Geneva, as in the eyes of their colleagues in New York, I remained a crypto-communist abusing his UN mandate whom they claimed to have unmasked: “You have a secret plan!” “You are engaged in a secret crusade against our president’s policies!” How many times did I hear these idiotic accusations?

They demanded my dismissal numerous times. But the friendship of UN secretary general Kofi Annan and the diplomatic savoir faire of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Sérgio Vieira de Mello ultimately saved my mandate. The last time, however, just barely so . . .

For Ambassador Tichenor, Morris was beyond reach. A Republican Party heavyweight, a businessman free of any ties to the administration, Morris could at any moment pick up his phone to call the White House. I don’t know if he ever spoke about the right to food with his friend George W. Bush.

Exhausted, worn out, Jim Morris left Rome in the spring of 2007.

## VICTORY OF THE PREDATORS

**I**n all my years as Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, the finest moments—the most intense and the most moving—were those I spent in school cafeterias and kitchens in Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Mongolia, and many other countries. There, I felt proud to be human.

The food varied according to the country. Meals were prepared with local products: manioc, teff, and millet in Africa; rice and chicken with sauces in Asia; quinoa and sweet potatoes on the high Andean plateau. On every continent, the WFP meals included vegetables. For dessert, there was always local fruit: mangoes, dates, grapes, and so on, depending upon the country.

One daily meal served in the school cafeteria could prompt parents to send their children to school and to keep them there. School meals obviously promoted learning and enabled students to concentrate on their studies. For only about 25 cents, the WFP could fill a bowl with porridge, rice, or vegetables, and give students a monthly ration to take back home with them. Fifty dollars was enough to feed a child in school for a year. In most cases, children were given breakfast and/or lunch at school. These meals were prepared at the school itself, by the community, or in central kitchens. Some school cafeteria programs offers full meals, while others provided high-energy biscuits or healthy snacks. The

WFP's famous take-home rations completed the cafeteria programs. Thanks to this system, entire families received food when their children went to school. Food was purchased in the area as much as possible; this approach profited local small farmers. Moreover, the meals served in the cafeteria were fortified with micronutrients. In this way, by providing essential nutrition in the poorest regions, school meals sometimes succeeded in breaking the cycle of hunger, poverty, and the exploitation of children. School meals were also given to children living with HIV/AIDS, orphans, handicapped children, and demobilized child soldiers.

Before 2009, the WFP provided school meals to 22 million children on average, the majority of them girls, in some seventy countries and at a total cost of \$460 million. In 2008, the WFP provided take-home rations to 2.7 million girls and 1.6 million boys. The WFP fed 730,000 children in kindergartens in fourteen countries: Haiti, the Central African Republic, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Benin, Liberia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

One day, in a school in Jessore, in Bangladesh, I noticed, all the way in the back of the class, a boy about seven years old who was sitting with his plate of porridge and beans in front of him on his desk, without touching it. He sat motionless, his head lowered. I asked Shah Mushid, who was then head of the WFP Jessore sub-office (he is now head of human resources and training for WFP Bangladesh), about the boy. He replied evasively, obviously embarrassed. Finally he allowed, "There are always problems. . . . Here in Jessore we don't have the means to give the students family rations that they can take home. So the boy refuses to eat. . . . He wants to take his meal home to his family."

I was shocked. "But why don't you let him? It's because he loves his family!"

Murshid replied, "The boy is hungry. He has to eat. The rules don't allow taking food out of the school."

This problem recurs wherever the WFP sets up school

cafeterias. Where the WFP's budget (and the funds from the NGOs who support it) does not allow it to provide supplementary food for students to take home to their families, strict rules apply.

In Sidamo, in southern Ethiopia, for example, the teacher locks the cafeteria as soon as a meal has been served, in order to force the students to eat on-site. When the children leave the cafeteria and head for the row of water taps in the courtyard to brush their teeth and wash their hands, the teacher reenters the school to check that all the meals have been eaten and that there are no full or half-full plates hidden under the children's desks.

The children love their families. To eat while their loved ones back at home are hungry conflicts with their feelings of loyalty and solidarity. So some of them prefer going without, gnawed by hunger, rather than eating, gnawed by guilt.

However, for tragic reasons, this problem hardly exists anymore. What happened is this: one afternoon in early October 2008, the seventeen leaders of the Eurozone governments met in the Élysée Palace in Paris. At six o'clock, Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy appeared on the steps before the press. To the assembled journalists they declared, "We have just freed up 1.7 trillion dollars to unfreeze the interbank lending market and to increase the bank's minimum capital requirements from 3 to 5 percent." Before the end of 2008, subsidies from the Eurozone countries for emergency food aid fell by almost half.

The WFP budget prior to the financial crisis was usually around \$6 billion; in 2009 it fell to \$3.2 billion. The WFP had to practically suspend school meals worldwide, particularly in Bangladesh. More than a million little Bengali girls and boys have since been deprived of WFP school meals.

In 2005, I visited many schools in Dhaka, Chittagong, and elsewhere (I discuss my 2005 mission to Bangladesh further in chapter 20, "Jalil Jilani and Her Children"). It was obvious that the little kids I saw, with their big black eyes and their frail bodies, were getting their only consistent meal of the day at school. I remember too a meeting I had that lasted several hours in the office of the minister of education in Dhaka. My colleagues and I, supported

by the local representative of the UN Development Programme, were fighting tooth and nail to end the practice of closing Bengali schools during their long vacations: in other words, to ensure the children access to one daily meal twelve months a year. The minister refused. Today, the question is a dead issue because, in one country after another, the WFP has suspended its school meals programs.

For 2011, the WFP estimated its “incompressible needs” (minimum budgetary requirements) at \$7 billion; as of early December 2010, it had received \$3.7 billion. This shortfall in revenue has had tragic consequences.

I saw the results close up in Bangladesh. In 2009, in this poor, densely populated country prone to natural disasters, 8 million men, women, and children lost all their sources of income and were therefore, to use the WFP’s own term, “on the edge of starvation,” owing to two back-to-back catastrophes: the devastation of agriculture caused by an extremely violent monsoon, and the closure of many textile factories reeling under the full brunt of the global financial crisis. In that year, the WFP’s Asian office requested \$257 million to provide aid to Bangladesh. It received \$76 million. The situation was even worse in 2010: the Asian office received only \$60 million for Bangladesh. For 2011, it expected an even more serious further collapse in donor states’ subsidies—and thus an even greater number of people condemned to die of hunger.

In other parts of the world, the situation is equally tragic. In 2010, the WFP budget for sub-Saharan Africa was \$2.6 billion—\$1.1 billion less than the agency needed to accomplish its mission.

It would be obviously unfair in any way to reproach Merkel, Sarkozy, José Zapatero (the prime minister of Spain from 2004 to 2011), or any of the other government leaders associated with the decision taken in 2008 to pour 1.7 trillion euros into their banks, to the detriment of subsidies allocated to the WFP. Merkel and Sarkozy were elected to support, and if necessary to restore order to, the German and French economies. They were not elected to fight world hunger. However, the suffering children of Chittagong,

Ulan Bator, or Tegucigalpa don’t vote. Nor will they die on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris, on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin, or in the Plaza de Armas in Madrid.

The ones who are truly responsible for this situation are the speculators—hedge fund managers, bigwig bankers, and other predators of the globalized finance industry who, by their obsession with profit and personal gain, wrecked the global financial system and destroyed billions and billions of dollars’ worth of countries’ national wealth. These predators should be tried for crimes against humanity. But they are so powerful—and governments are so weak—that they are obviously under no threat of anything like that at all.

On the contrary. Since 2009, they have merrily returned to their wicked ways, barely checked by the few timid new laws and standards—minimum capital requirements, lightly enhanced oversight of derivatives, and so on—announced by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, the institution that coordinates the rich countries’ central banks. Almost as if nothing had ever happened.



## “NATURAL” SELECTION REDUX

In the WFP's dilapidated building in Rome there are two rooms where the fate—or, more concretely, the life or death—of hundreds of thousands of people is decided every day.

The first of these, the situation room, houses the WFP's database. The WFP's greatest power resides in its capacity to react as quickly as possible to disasters and to mobilize with minimal delay the ships, trucks, and planes needed to transport food and water indispensable to the survival of the victims of hunger. The WFP's average reaction time is about forty-eight hours. The walls of the situation room are covered with enormous maps and screens. On the long black tables are piles of meteorological charts, satellite images, and so on. All the harvests everywhere in the world are monitored on a daily basis. The movements of locust swarms, the tariffs on maritime freight, and the prices of rice, wheat, corn, millet, barley, and palm oil on the Chicago Board of Trade commodities exchange and other agricultural commodities exchanges around the world, as well as many other economic variables—all are constantly scrutinized, studied, and analyzed. En route from Vietnam and the port of Dakar, for example, rice is at sea for six months. Changes in the cost of transportation play a crucial role. The predictable variations in the price of a barrel of oil constitute another

element that is closely followed by the economists and specialists in transportation insurance who work in the WFP situation room. These specialists are highly effective, ready to deliver any information necessary even with the least advance warning.

The other strategy room at the WFP headquarters in Rome, even if much less impressive at first sight, and less busy with experts of all kinds, is the Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) branch of the Food Security Analysis Unit, currently headed by the energetic Joyce Luma. There Luma's team issues minutely detailed analyses that identify vulnerable groups on all five continents.

In a certain sense, Luma is tasked with establishing the hierarchy of extreme poverty. She works with all the other UN organizations, NGOs, churches, national ministries of health and of social affairs, and above all the regional and local WFP directors. In Cambodia, Peru, Bangladesh, Malawi, Chad, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Laos, and many other countries, she subcontracts field research to local NGOs. Armed with detailed questionnaires, the field researchers (usually women) go from village to village, shantytown to shantytown, hamlet to hamlet, interviewing heads of families, isolated individuals, and single mothers about their income, employment, food situation, illnesses afflicting their family, lack of water, and so on. The questionnaires generally comprise between thirty and fifty questions, all developed in Rome. Once they have been filled out, the questionnaires are returned to Rome to be analyzed by Luma and her team.

Elie Wiesel is certainly one of the greatest writers of our time. He is himself a survivor of the camps at Aushwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald. He has highlighted with particular clarity the nearly insurmountable contradiction that affects any discussion of the extermination camps. On the one hand, the Nazi camps represent a crime so monstrous that no human speech is really capable of expressing it: to speak of Auschwitz is to make the inexpressible banal. But on the other hand there is the unavoidable obligation of memory: everything, even the most monstrous crime, may happen again at any time. It is therefore necessary to speak out,

informing and warning the generations who have not experienced the unspeakable of the threat of relapse.

At the heart of the Nazi horror was the “selection process.” The ramp at which prisoners disembarked from the trains at Auschwitz was the place where, in the blink of an eye, the fate of each new arrival was decided: to the left for those who would die, to the right for those who, for a while at least, would be allowed to live.

Selection is equally at the heart of Luma’s work. Since the WFP’s funding has collapsed and the amount of available food going forward will be insufficient to respond to the needs of the millions whose empty hands reach out for it, one has no choice but to choose.

Luma tries to be fair. By every technical means at the disposal of the biggest humanitarian organization in the world, she strives to identify, in each country ravaged by hunger, the most gravely afflicted people, the most vulnerable, those in the most immediate danger of starving to death. The individuals and groups who, unluckily, do not fall into the “extremely vulnerable” category are left stranded, although they belong no less among the populations threatened with serious undernutrition—and thus with impending death, however much delayed.

Joyce Luma, this woman radiant with humanity and compassion, decides who will live and who will die. She too practices “selection,” even if she does so—and even if this fact forbids any comparison with the Nazi horror—in the name of an objective necessity imposed upon the WFP.

## JALIL JILANI AND HER CHILDREN

Bangladesh is an immense fertile delta some 144,000 square kilometers (55,600 square miles) in area, with a population of 150.5 million. It is the most densely populated country on the planet. Before my first mission to Bangladesh, Dr. Ali Toufiq Ali, the Bengali permanent representative to the UN office in Geneva, told me, “You will never be alone, you will see people everywhere.” And in fact, wherever I went, from north to south, in Jessore or Jamalpur, or in the mangrove swamps on the Bay of Bengal, I found myself surrounded by smiling men, women, and children, wearing clothes that, though worn, were impeccably clean and pressed. Unassuming, smiling, constantly in motion, the Bengalis are indeed *everywhere*.

But Bangladesh is also one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Throughout my entire mandate as UN Special Rapporteur, I was only once offered a bribe, in Dhaka, in point of fact, in 2005. Accompanied by Christophe Golay and my colleagues Sally-Anne Way and Dutima Bagwali, two brilliant and elegant young women, I was seated before the minister of foreign affairs—a fat man with cruel eyes, covered in sweat despite the ceiling fan, and himself one of the country’s textile barons—and his parliamentary secretary, in the ministry’s main reception hall. For at least an hour, I had been trying to get the minister to talk about the

vast shrimp farms that Indian multinational corporations had been authorized to develop in the mangrove swamps along the coast of the Bay of Bengal.

Bengali fishers had complained to me. Their traditional small-scale coastal fisheries had been ruined, they told me. The Indian shrimp farms were blocking their access to the sea along hundreds of miles of coastline. I was confronted with an obvious violation of the Bengali fishers' right to food on the part of their own government. I wanted to obtain from the minister a copy of the contracts signed by his government and the Indian multinationals involved.

The minister totally stonewalled me. Instead of replying to my questions, he insisted on embarking—very clumsily—on a charm offensive directed toward my pretty young colleagues, which, very obviously, exasperated both of them.

Suddenly the minister smiled sweetly and, in front of his parliamentary secretary, said, "My company periodically offers high-level conferences to its international clients. I invite intellectuals and university professors from all over the world, mostly from the United States and Europe. Our clients appreciate it. Those who attend our conferences do too. We pay sizeable honoraria. . . . Do you have any free time in your calendar? I would be happy to invite you."

A young Guyanese woman with a fiery temper, Bagwali had already stood up. Way and Golay were likewise ready to head out the door. I restrained them. The parliamentary secretary smiled devotedly. The minister did not understand why, in such an abrupt fashion, I put an end to our meeting and we took our leave.

Dhaka . . . The wet heat makes your clothes stick to your skin. At the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development I met with Waliur Rahman, then the secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a young student, he had been sent by Mujibur Rahman to Geneva in 1971, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, when the country (then East Pakistan), with help from India, fought off an occupying Pakistani army and seceded from Pakistan.

Muammar Murshid and Rane Saravanamuttu, from the local WFP bureau, joined Waliur and me for a visit to the Gulshan

shantytown, part of the Karall slum, one of the largest in Dhaka, where 800,000 people live in shacks and huts made from canvas and planks on the muddy riverbanks. All the peoples of this vast "land of a thousand rivers," as the Bangladeshis call their splendid homeland, are gathered here: thousands of refugee families from Jamalpur, where the monsoon had caused twelve thousand deaths the year before; Shantali and other tribal peoples of the mangrove forest regions; and members of animist tribal groups, the poorest inhabitants in the country and the most despised by the Muslim majority. In the Gulshan shantytown there also live hundreds of thousands of members of the urban underclass, the permanently unemployed, and workers recently laid off from the gigantic textile subcontractors. Adherents of all the nation's religions mingle together here too: Muslims, the vast majority; Hindus from the north; and Catholics, members of formerly animist tribal groups who were converted by European missionaries during the colonial period.

I asked to visit some of the people's shacks. Rahman contacted the municipal ward commissioner representing the neighborhood. Few of the dwellings in the shantytown have doors. A simple colored curtain covered the entrance. The commissioner lifted the curtain. In the room, feebly lit by a candle, I found, sitting on the single bed, a young woman wearing an old sari with four small children. They were thin and pale. They stared at us with big black eyes, neither speaking nor moving. Only on the young mother's face was there the hint of a timid smile. Her name was Jalil Jilani. Her children were two, four, five, and six years old. Two girls, two boys. Her husband, a rickshaw driver, had died of tuberculosis a few months before.

Bangladesh is one of the main countries in South and Southeast Asia where Western multinational textile corporations have their jeans, sport shirts, suits, and other clothing sewn, mainly by women, in so-called free or special economic zones. The costs of production are unbeatable. The factories that subcontract the work are mostly owned by South Korean and Taiwanese businesses.

The free economic zones comprise almost all the suburbs south of Dhaka, where immense concrete buildings rising from seven to

ten stories jostle against one another. No health and safety regulations, no minimum wage laws are enforced. Unions are banned. Workers are hired and fired according to the fluctuations in orders coming from New York, London, Hong Kong, or Paris.

Jilani had been employed by Spectrum Sweater Industries, in Savar, near Dhaka. More than five thousand people, 90 percent of them women, cut, sewed, and packaged T-shirts, sweatpants, and jeans at Spectrum for big American, European, and Australian designer labels. The legal minimum wage in urban areas in Bangladesh in 2005 was 930 takas a month, or about \$14.50. Spectrum Sweater paid its workers 700 takas per month, or about \$11.00.

The Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), the global garment industry's largest alliance of labor unions and NGOs, founded in 1989 and based in Amsterdam, is "dedicated to improving working conditions and supporting the empowerment of workers in the global garment and sportswear industries." The CCC has calculated that of the \$75 price of a pair of jeans made at Spectrum Sweater, the garment worker who sewed them was paid about 33 cents.

On the night of April 10 to 11, 2005, the nine-story reinforced-concrete building housing Spectrum Sweaters collapsed. The cause: flawed construction and a lack of maintenance and inspections. But in the free economic zones, the factories operate twenty-four hours a day. As a result, when the disaster struck, every workstation was occupied. When the building fell, hundreds of workers went down with it and were buried alive beneath the rubble. The government refused to provide an exact figure for the number of victims. Spectrum Sweater, for its part, laid off all the survivors, without paying any compensation or severance.

The extreme undernutrition Jilani and her children were suffering was evident at first sight. I turned to Muammar Murshid. He shook his head. No, the young mother and her children were not on the list of recipients of WFP food aid. The reason? Jilani had been laid off in April. Murshid was very sorry. He was the WFP representative in Bangladesh. He had to enforce the organization's directives from Rome. Jilani had had regular work during more than three months of the current year, which automatically

excluded her from WFP aid. She had no grounds for appeal. In the accounting system for extreme poverty that Joyce Luma oversees in Rome, Jalil Jilani and her four children, gnawed by hunger, had thus exited the category of those with a right to aid.

Murshid murmured a quick good-bye in Bengali. I left all the takas I had on me at the end of the bed. Rahman let the curtain fall behind us.

## THE DEFEAT OF JACQUES DIOUF

The FAO is sumptuously housed. Surrounded by fragrant gardens and parasol pines, its palatial world headquarters, a vast modernist building on the Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, formerly housed Mussolini's colonial ministry, the Department of Italian East Africa. Until recently, a great treasure graced the square in front of the building: the Obelisk of Axum, which was returned to Ethiopia in 2005.

Founded, as I have said, at the instigation of Josué de Castro and his friends in October 1945 (that is, one and a half years after the UN), the FAO was given an ambitious mandate, outlined in the first article of organization's constitution:

### *Article I*

#### *Functions of the Organization*

1. The Organization shall collect, analyse, interpret and disseminate information relating to nutrition, food and agriculture. In this Constitution, the term "agriculture" and its derivatives include fisheries, marine products, forestry and primary forestry products.

2. The Organization shall promote and, where appropriate, shall recommend national and international action with respect to:

(a) scientific, technological, social and economic research relating to nutrition, food and agriculture;

(b) the improvement of education and administration relating to nutrition, food and agriculture, and the spread of public knowledge of nutritional and agricultural science and practice;

(c) the conservation of natural resources and the adoption of improved methods of agricultural production;

(d) the improvement of the processing, marketing and distribution of food and agricultural products;

(e) the adoption of policies for the provision of adequate agricultural credit, national and international;

(f) the adoption of international policies with respect to agricultural commodity arrangements.

In the vast white-marble-clad entrance hall of the FAO's headquarters, the agency's insignia is mounted on the right-hand wall. Beneath a stalk of wheat on a blue ground is written the organization's motto: *Ecce panis*—"Let there be bread" ("for all" is understood).

What, today, is the situation of the FAO?

The organization comprises 191 member states (as well as the European Union, the Faroe Islands, and Tokelau as associate members). However, global agricultural policy, and in particular the question of food security, is determined by the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. The FAO is largely absent from the battlefield. It has been bled dry, gutted.

The FAO is an intergovernmental organization. The global private corporations that control most of the world market in food products fight against it. These corporations enjoy a certain influence over the policies of the principal Western governments. The result: these governments withdraw from the FAO, restricting its budget and boycotting the world conferences on food security that the FAO convenes in Rome.

Currently about 70 percent of the FAO's meager funds serve to pay its staff. Of the remaining 30 percent, about half goes to pay the fees of the FAO's myriad external "consultants." Only

the remaining 15 percent of the FAO's budget pays for technical cooperation, agricultural development in the South, and the fight against hunger.

For several years, the organization has been the object of virulent criticism, largely unjustified, since it is the governments of the industrialized countries that deprive the FAO of its capacity for taking action. In 1989, the English writer Graham Hancock published a book, which has since been reprinted many times, titled *The Lords of Poverty*. According to Hancock, the FAO is nothing but a grim, gigantic bureaucracy that, on account of an interminable succession of conferences, meetings, committees, and expensive events of all kinds, does nothing but administrate poverty, undernutrition, and hunger. In its day-to-day practice, the bureaucracy at the Baths of Caracalla, Hancock says, incarnates the very opposite of the project initially conceived by de Castro. Hancock's conclusion is unanswerable: "One gets the sense . . . of an institution that has lost its way, departed from its purely humanitarian and developmental mandate, become confused about its place in the world—about exactly what it is doing, and why." *The Ecologist* is even more scathing. In a special issue published in 1991, the magazine assembled a collection of essays written by respected international experts such as Vandana Shiva, Edward Goldsmith, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Barbara Dinham, and Miguel A. Altiera under the title *The UN Food and Agriculture Organization: Promoting World Hunger*. The authors accuse the FAO of mistaken strategies, wasting colossal sums of money that are swallowed up by useless action plans, and a range of false economic analyses whose effect has been not to reduce but to increase the tragedy of world hunger. As for the BBC, its verdict on the periodic summits organized by the FAO is equally unanswerable: the summits are simply a "waste of time"—and money.

In my opinion, even if the FAO must admit that certain of these criticisms are valid, the organization must be defended against any and all of its critics—and especially against the giants of the agri-food trade, which have their tentacles everywhere, and their accomplices in the Western governments.

In 2010, the industrialized countries represented in the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) spent \$349 billion on subsidies for agricultural production and export. Export subsidies in particular are responsible for the dumping of agricultural products practiced by the rich countries in the markets of the poor countries. In the southern hemisphere, such dumping creates severe poverty and hunger.

By comparison, the FAO's "total proposed *Net Budgetary Appropriation* to be funded from assessed contributions" for the 2012–13 fiscal year is \$1.0571 billion—a fraction of the amount that the rich countries spend on their agricultural subsidies.

How can the organization meet its obligations, at least partially? The term *monitoring* is used by the FAO to designate a strategy of transparency, information sharing, and permanent investigation into the details of the evolving global situation in undernutrition and hunger. On all five continents, vulnerable groups are listed and ranked, month by month; the various deficiencies in micronutrients (vitamins, minerals, trace elements) are logged, element by element, region by region. Statistics, graphs, reports flow uninterrupted from the FAO's headquarters in Rome: not one of the immense army of the hungry suffers or dies without leaving a trace on an FAO graph.

The self-proclaimed adversaries of the FAO also criticize its monitoring policies. Instead of compiling minute statistics on the hungry, they say, constructing mathematical models of suffering, and drawing colored graphs to represent the dead, the FAO would do better to use its money, its know-how, and its energy to reduce the number of victims. This critique also seems to me unfair. The FAO's monitoring informs our anticipatory consciousness; it prepares the way for a future uprising in our collective conscience. For one thing, this book could not have been written without the statistics, inventories, graphs, and other tables produced by the FAO.

The FAO owes its monitoring system to one man in particular, Jacques Diouf, of Senegal, the organization's director general from 2000 to 2011. Diouf is a nutritionist, and a socialist who served as secretary of state for science and technology from 1978 to 1983 under both Léopold Sédar Senghor and his successor, Abdou

Diouf. Previously, Diouf had served as the first executive secretary of the West Africa Rice Development Association (WARDA; now the Africa Rice Center), based in Monrovia, Liberia.

Good-humored, gifted with a subtle intelligence and formidable vitality, Diouf woke up and shook up the FAO bureaucrats in Rome. His aggressive, sometimes brutal way of addressing heads of state, and his statements, issued through newspapers and on radio and television worldwide, that attempted to arouse and influence public opinion in the dominant countries deeply irritated certain leaders of Western governments and other officials. Many sought any possible pretext to discredit him.

One such attempt to discredit Diouf took place at the second World Food Summit, held by the FAO in Rome in 2002. On the top floor of the FAO headquarters building, the director general has access to a private dining room where, like all the directors of the UN's specialized agencies, he entertains heads of state and heads of government. On the third day of the summit, the day after an especially harsh speech by Diouf criticizing the private global agri-food corporations, the British press published front-page stories featuring details of the menu from the dinner Diouf had hosted the day before for the visiting heads of state and heads of government. The meal, obviously, had been lavish. The head of the British delegation, who had himself attended the dinner, took this "revelation" as a pretext for launching an incendiary diatribe against the director general in an open plenary meeting, accusing him of speaking about hunger in public while, in private, stuffing himself at the expense of the FAO's contributing member nations.

I feel admiration for Jacques Diouf, because I have seen him at work on many occasions. For example, in July 2008, following the first of a series of surges in the prices of staple food commodities on the global market, food riots raged in thirty-seven countries, as I have said above. The regular session of the UN General Assembly was set to open in September. Diouf was convinced that it was necessary to seize this occasion to launch a massive international campaign whose aim would be to paralyze the activity of the speculators who were driving up food prices. He therefore mobilized his friends in the Socialist International, a worldwide

organization of social democratic, socialist, and labor parties. The Spanish government under Zapatero agreed to spearhead this campaign: the resolution that would be proposed on the first day of the General Assembly session would be sponsored by Spain.

Foreseeing the battle to come, Diouf furthermore convened a meeting of the leaders of all the international organizations involved in the fight against hunger and related to one of the more than one hundred member parties of the Socialist International. The meeting took place at the seat of the Spanish federal government, the Palacio de la Moncada, in Madrid. In the great white room, lit by the Castilian sun, there were, seated around a black table, António Guterres, former president of the Socialist International, former prime minister of Portugal, and then UN High Commissioner for Refugees; the French socialist Pascal Lamy, director general of the WTO; leaders of the Brazilian Workers' Party; a cabinet minister in the British Labour government; obviously, José Zapatero himself, together with Miguel Ángel Moratinos, his minister of foreign affairs, and Bernardino León, the Spanish secretary of state for foreign affairs; and finally myself, in my capacity as vice president of the UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee.

Diouf shook us like a hurricane. Linking a whole series of precise measures against speculators to a demand addressed to the states that are signatories to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, reminding them of their obligation to honor the right to food, Diouf's proposed resolution incited intense discussions among everyone present. Diouf hung on. Agreement was reached toward two o'clock in the morning.

In September, before the UN General Assembly in New York, Spain presented its resolution, seconded by Brazil and France. But the measure was simply swept aside by a coalition led by the representative from the United States and several ambassadors under the remote control of certain global agri-food corporations.

#### POSTSCRIPT: THE MURDER OF IRAQ'S CHILDREN

Obviously, neither the WFP nor the FAO can be held responsible for the difficulties and the setbacks that they have encountered.

But there is one case in which the UN itself, willingly and intentionally, has caused the extermination by hunger of hundreds of thousands of human beings. This crime was committed within the framework of the oil-for-food program imposed upon the Iraqi people by the UN Security Council in 1995 and ostensibly discontinued with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (the program continued de facto until 2010).

Recall the history behind the program. On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein sent his forces to invade the emirate of Kuwait, which he annexed, proclaiming it the twenty-seventh Iraqi province. The UN initially responded by decreeing an economic blockade against Iraq and by demanding the immediate withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait; then the UN issued an ultimatum set to expire on January 15, 1991.

Under the direction of the United States, Western and Arab countries formed a coalition whose forces attacked the occupying Iraqi troops in Kuwait once the UN ultimatum had expired; 120,000 Iraqi troops and 25,000 Iraqi civilians lost their lives in Kuwait. But the tanks under commander in chief General Norman Schwarzkopf halted a hundred kilometers from Baghdad, leaving intact the Republican Guard, the Iraqi dictator's elite troops. The fall of Saddam Hussein was considered likely to lead to the installation in Baghdad of a majority Shi'ite government; the Western governments feared the Iraqi Shi'ites like the plague, suspecting them of owing allegiance to the tyrannical regime in Teheran.

The UN intensified its blockade, but at the same time inaugurated the oil-for-food program (officially, the Office of the Iraq Programme—Oil-for-Food), which permitted Saddam Hussein to sell a certain quantity of Iraq's oil on the world market every six months. (With 112 billion barrels of oil, Iraq has the second-largest petroleum reserves in the world, after Saudi Arabia, with 220 billion barrels, and ahead of Iran, with 80 billion barrels.) The revenues from the sales were paid into an escrow account held until 2001 by BNP Paribas in New York. The money allowed Iraq to buy on the world market goods indispensable to the survival of its population. In concrete terms, a business holding a contract for delivery of goods to the Iraqi government submitted a request for

the liberation of the necessary funds to the bank in New York. The UN approved or denied the delivery according to the criterion of suspected "dual-use function": if the UN believed that any good—machines, replacement parts, chemicals, construction materials, and so on—might have any military use, the request was denied.

The coordinator of the oil-for-food program, who headed the UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq (UNOHC), was installed in Baghdad, with the rank of UN assistant secretary general, and with eight hundred UN functionaries at his disposal as well as twelve hundred locally hired officials. He reported to the Office of the Iraq Programme (OIP) in New York, which was responsible for examining the requests presented by businesses seeking to make exports to Iraq. The program was headed by Benon Sevan of Cyprus, the former head of the UN security services, who was promoted to the rank of assistant secretary general in the UN Department of Political Affairs in July 1992 as a result of pressure from the United States and who would prove to be a crook. Sevan was in fact indicted for fraud in New York District Court but fled to Cyprus, where he is living happily ever after. The OIP was in turn overseen by a committee on sanctions of the UN Security Council responsible for the program's general strategy.

On paper, the oil-for-food program was inspired by the usual principles of embargoes as they are applied by the UN. But in practice, the program was deliberately diverted from its purpose in a way that proved deadly for the civilian population. Very soon, in effect, the sanctions committee began to deny more and more frequently requests for the importation of food, medicines, and other vital necessities under the pretexts that the food might be used to feed Saddam Hussein's army, that the medicines might contain chemicals with military applications, that certain parts of medical devices could also be used to make arms, and so on.

In the hospitals of Iraq, patients began to die for lack of medicines, surgical instruments, and sterilization supplies. According to reliable estimates, as many as 550,000 Iraqi children may have died of undernutrition and other causes between 1996 and 2000. Thus, gradually, beginning in 1996, the oil-for-food program was diverted from its original mission and came to serve as a weapon



of collective punishment for the Iraqi population, based on the deprivation of food and medicine. One of the most respected international jurists, Marc Bossuyt, former chairman of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (today the UN Human Rights Council), has said that the strategy of the UN sanctions committee against Iraq amounted to "genocide."

Here are a few statistics on the consequences of this murderous strategy imposed upon Iraq, a large country with 26 million inhabitants. According to estimates by the German NGO Medico International, less than 60 percent of medicines essential to the treatment of cancer was admitted. The importation of dialysis machines for the treatment of patients with kidney failure was purely and simply forbidden. Gulam Rabani Popal, the WHO representative in Baghdad, asked permission in 2000 to import thirty-one dialysis machines, which Iraqi hospitals urgently needed. The eleven machines that were finally authorized by the OIP in New York were held at the Jordanian border for two years.

In 1999, Carol Bellamy, the American executive director of UNICEF from 1995 to 2005, addressed the Security Council in person. The sanctions committee had refused to authorize the importation of supplies necessary for intravenous nutrition for seriously undernourished infants and young children. Bellamy protested vigorously. The sanctions committee remained adamant in its refusal.

War had destroyed the gigantic water purification plants on the Tigris, Euphrates, and Shatt al-Arab rivers. The sanctions committee refused to allow delivery of construction materials and replacement parts necessary for the reconstruction and restoration of the plants. The incidence of infectious diseases caused by the pollution of drinking water exploded.

In Iraq, summer temperatures can reach 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit). The sanctions forbid the importation of replacement parts for refrigerators and air-conditioning units. In the butcher shops, meat began to rot. Grocers watched as their milk, fruit, and vegetables were destroyed by the heat. In the hospitals, it became impossible to keep the small amount of available medicines properly refrigerated.

Even the importation of ambulances was blocked by the sanc-

tions committee. The reason? Because they contained "communications systems that could be used by Saddam Hussein's troops." When the ambassadors of first France and then Germany remarked that communications systems such as a telephone were indispensable in every ambulance in the world, the American ambassador couldn't have cared less: no ambulances for Iraq. (A few were later permitted after a delay of a year or two.)

Tens of thousands of Egyptian *fellahin*, specialists in irrigation who bear witness to a magnificent ancestral heritage of agricultural experience acquired in the Nile River Valley and the Nile Delta, were working in Iraq in the ancient Fertile Crescent, between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in Iraq. Nonetheless, Iraq in this period imported nearly 80 percent of its food. But under the embargo, food imports were usually intentionally delayed by the sanctions committee. Documents reveal that thousands of tons of rice, fruit, and vegetables went bad in trucks held up at the borders because they had not gotten the green light from New York, or because they got it only after months of delay.

The dictatorship of the sanctions committee was merciless. It attacked even the educational system. The Security Council accordingly forbade the importation of pencils. The reason? Pencils contain graphite, a material with potential military uses.

The UN blockade completely destroyed the Iraqi economy. As a report released in March 1999 under the auspices of Celso Amorim, who represented Brazil on the UN Security Council and presided over its Iraq Panels in 1998 and 1999, said in a widely quoted passage, "Even if not all suffering in Iraq can be imputed to external factors, especially sanctions, the Iraqi people would not be undergoing such deprivations in the absence of the prolonged measures imposed by the Security Council and the effects of war." Hasmy Agam, the head of the Malaysian mission to the UN, wrote in even starker terms: "How ironic it is that the same policy that is supposed to disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction has itself become a weapon of mass destruction."

What can explain this drift in UN policy?

Elected in 1993, President Bill Clinton did not want under any circumstances to get involved in a second Gulf war. Under these

conditions, the Iraqi people had to be subjected to a regime of such intense suffering that they would rebel against the tyrant ruling over them and drive him from power. Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, must without doubt be held mainly responsible for the secret transformation of the oil-for-food program into a weapon of collective punishment for the Iraqi people.

In May 1996, Albright, then U.S. ambassador to the UN, was interviewed on NBC's *60 Minutes*, for an Emmy award-winning segment titled "Punishing Saddam." The first articles on the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the embargo had begun to circulate in the press. Lesley Stahl, who interviewed Albright, echoed those reports: "We have heard that half a million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?" Albright replied, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it."

Obviously, Albright was perfectly well informed about the martyrdom of Iraq's children. UNICEF published the following figures: before the collective punishment implemented by the UN, the infant mortality rate in Iraq was 56 children per 1,000; in 1999, it was 131 per 1,000, with children dying from hunger and lack of medicine—an enormous increase. In eleven years, the massacre led by Albright and implemented by the UN killed several hundred thousand children.

There is no question here of casting doubt on the tyrannical and criminal character of Saddam Hussein's regime. There is no doubt that his regime constituted one of the worst that the Arab world has known. And no doubt, furthermore, that during the eleven years of the embargo, Saddam Hussein, his family, and their accomplices lived like moguls. Year after year, they exported oil illegally through Turkey and Jordan for a total sum estimated at \$10 billion. However, the principal responsibility for the death by hunger of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis remains with the sanctions committee of the UN Security Council.

In October 1998, Kofi Annan named Hans Christof Graf von Sponeck UN Assistant Secretary General and UN Humanitarian Coordinator (and thus coordinator of the oil-for-food program) in

Baghdad. His predecessor, an Irishman and thirty-four-year veteran of the UN, Denis Halliday, had just resigned in an uproar. A historian trained at the University of Tübingen, von Sponeck is the antithesis of a bureaucrat. During his thirty-seven years of service at the UN, he had always held field postings, first as an official with the UN Development Programme in Ghana and in Turkey, then as a resident representative of the UN in Botswana, India, and Pakistan. The only post he held far from the front lines in developing countries was that of UNDP regional director in Geneva—where he was, by his own admission, bored stiff. No one, on the thirty-eighth floor of the UN headquarters in New York, where the secretary general, his principal undersecretaries general, and members of their staffs all work, suspected von Sponeck's family history, which would one day be revealed, with explosive consequences.

In Baghdad, von Sponeck discovered the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe. Like virtually all UN officials and world public opinion, he had previously been totally ignorant of it. As soon as he understood how the embargo had been hijacked and turned into a means of collective punishment, and saw the weapon of hunger in action, von Sponeck spoke out loud and clear to express how appalled he was. He tried to alert the press, his own government, and above all the Security Council. The Americans blocked his appearance before the council.

Albright's spokesman, James P. Rubin, tried to discredit von Sponeck by spreading all kinds of lies about him. "This man in Baghdad is paid to work, not to speak," he said mockingly at a press briefing. As for the British ambassador, Stewart Eldon, he reprimanded von Sponeck, saying, "As the UN Humanitarian Coordinator you have no business dealing with issues outside your area of competence! In any case, all you are doing is putting a UN seal of approval on Iraqi propaganda." Albright finally demanded von Sponeck's dismissal. Kofi Annan refused. The hatred that Albright directed against von Sponeck and the campaign of defamation led by Rubin only intensified. But above all, the memory of his father made the situation less and less bearable for von Sponeck: he could not imagine making himself, on the ground

or from a distance, an accomplice to what not a few were calling genocide. On February 11, 2000, he sent his letter of resignation to New York. Jutta Burghardt, head of the UN World Food Programme in Iraq, did the same. Von Sponeck was succeeded by a dull bureaucrat from Myanmar.

The American bombing of Baghdad on the night of March 7–8, 2003, followed by the ground invasion, officially put an end to the oil-for-food program.

Hans Emil Otto Graf von Sponeck, a General-Leutnant in the Wehrmacht and commander of a division on the Russian front, refused to execute an inhumane order not to retreat that would have resulted in the destruction of his division in the winter of 1941. A military tribunal found him guilty of disobeying a superior officer and condemned him to death. However, an appeal to Hitler for clemency by another general was successful, and the Führer commuted the sentence to six years in the Germersheim Fortress, which was used as a political prison, notably for members of the Norwegian and Danish Resistance.

On July 20, 1944, a group of German officers led by Claus von Stauffenberg attempted to assassinate Hitler at his Wolf's Lair field headquarters near Rastenburg in East Prussia. The attempt, alas, failed. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, vowed to extirpate all organized resistance within the officer corps. Von Sponeck, suspected of anti-Nazi sympathies, was executed by firing squad on Himmler's orders on July 23, 1944.

I asked Hans Emil von Sponeck's son how he had been able to bear for years Albright's crass insults and Rubin's lies, while it must have taken a great deal of strength and courage to break the UN's *omertà*, its own Mafia-like code of silence, in order to stand up in opposition to the powerful sanctions committee, and thereby to renounce his career. Hans Christof Graf von Sponeck is a modest man. He replied, "To have had a father like mine creates certain obligations."

## PART V

### THE VULTURES OF "GREEN GOLD"

The oil and gas industry supply chain for hydrocarbons like methane, mostly in English, called synthetic natural gas (SNG) or synthetic natural gas (SNG), is based on the ancient Greek idea of life, the course of human life, which is described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as all human life involves that the whole of one's life is produced from a single source, or in other words, there is no direct link with the term SNG, used in many European languages as the equivalent of the English term "synthetic natural gas" and "synthetic gas," but the evolution of terms benefits the public usage of these facts, indicating the importance that they are clean and ecologically sound.

Synthetic natural gas is produced by the processing of plants containing various sugars called carbohydrates, such as sugar beets and sugar cane, or the remaining starch (potato, corn, and so on). In the first case, the fuel is made by fermenting sugar contained in the sugar-bearing plants to be converted by enzymatic hydrolysis of the starch component of cereals or protein in which water splits off carbohydrates into ethanol, digestion, the fuel obtained by the latter process is also called ethanol, ethanol, as for bioethanol, it is obtained from vegetable oil or animal fat, transformed by a chemical process called methanolysis, a form of transesterification. It



which the fats are reacted catalytically with an alcohol, usually ethanol or methanol.

“Green gold” has been viewed for several years now as a magical and profitable complement to “black gold” (that is, oil). In support of these new fuel sources, the agri-food corporations that dominate the production and trade in biofuels advance an apparently irrefutable argument: the substitution of energy from plant sources for its fossil-fuel siblings is the ultimate weapon in the battle against global climate change and the irreversible degradation of the environment and damage to human life that it will cause.

Here are a few statistics: More than 600 million barrels of bioethanol and biodiesel were produced in 2011. In the same year, some 100 million hectares (247 million acres) were farmed to produce crops for biofuels. With regard to the climate argument, it should be noted that world production of biofuels doubled between 2006 and 2011.

On a global scale, desertification and soil degradation now affect more than a billion people in more than a hundred countries. The dry regions, where an arid or semi-arid climate makes the soil especially vulnerable to degradation, constitute more than 44 percent of the planet’s arable land. The consequences of soil degradation are especially serious in Africa, where millions of people depend entirely on the earth to survive as small farmers or pastoralists and there are practically no other means of subsistence. The arid regions of Africa are inhabited by 325 million people (out of nearly 1 billion in the continent as a whole), with heavy concentrations in Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, Morocco, and Algeria, and, in West Africa, south of a line drawn from Dakar to Bamako and Ouagadougou. Currently, around 500 million hectares (1.2 billion acres) of arable land in Africa are affected by soil degradation.

In mountainous countries all over the world, glaciers are retreating. Consider, for example, Bolivia. The highest peak in the country, Nevado Sajama, rises above the high Andean plateau, the Altiplano, to a height of 6,542 meters (21,463 feet); snow-capped Illimani, which overlooks the bowl-like canyon where

La Paz, the capital, lies, reaches 6,450 meters (21,161 feet); and the seracs (pinnacles and ridges of ice on the surface of glaciers) and other glacial features of the Huayna-Potosí in the Cordillera Real reach 6,088 meters (19,973 feet). The snows of these peaks glisten in the sun- and moonlight. The inhabitants of the *ayllus* (traditional indigenous Andean communities, dating back to pre-Inca times, which have become newly visible under President Evo Morales) and their priests consider the mountains sacred and eternal. But eternal they are not.

For global warming is melting the glaciers and making the snowfields retreat. The rivers are swelling. The situation is becoming catastrophic, especially in the Yungas forest on the eastern slopes of the Andes, where torrential floods caused by melting snow tear through the villages on the riverbanks, killing livestock and people, destroying bridges, and gouging out ravines. And, eventually, the loss of glacial volume may pose critical problems for water resources.

Everywhere in the world, the deserts are growing. In China and Mongolia, on the edges of the Gobi Desert, every year more and more pasture and cropland is swallowed up by the sand dunes as they advance upon the fertile land. In the Sahel, the Sahara is advancing in some zones by five kilometers (three miles) a year. I have seen in Mek’ele, in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, skeletal women and children trying to survive on land that erosion has transformed into acres of dust. Stalks of teff, the national cereal, barely grow 30 centimeters (1 foot) tall, as opposed to 1.5 meters (4 feet) in Gondar or Sidamo.

The destruction of ecosystems and the degradation of vast agricultural zones worldwide, but above all in Africa, is a tragedy for small farmers and pastoralists. The UN estimates that there are 25 million “ecological refugees” or “environmental migrants,” that is, human beings who are forced to leave their homes following natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and desertification, to end up having to fight to survive in the shantytowns of the big cities. Soil degradation provokes conflicts, especially between farmers and pastoralists. Many conflicts, especially in

sub-Saharan Africa, including the Darfur region of Sudan, are closely linked to the phenomena of drought and desertification, which, as they worsen, spark conflicts between nomads and sedentary farmers for access to resources.

The global corporations that produce biofuels have, however, succeeded in persuading the majority of world public opinion and virtually all of the Western nations that energy from plant sources constitutes the miracle weapon against climate change. Yet their argument is a lie. It ignores the methods and environmental costs of biofuel production, which requires both water and energy.

All over the planet, drinking water is becoming scarcer and scarcer. One person in three is currently reduced to drinking polluted water; nine thousand children under age ten die each day from ingesting water unfit for drinking. Of the 4 billion cases of diarrhea counted annually, 2.2 million are fatal, mainly among infants and children. But diarrhea is only one of numerous illnesses transmitted by poor-quality water: others include trachoma, schistosomiasis (bilharzia), cholera, typhoid, dysentery, hepatitis, malaria, and others. Many of these diseases are caused by the presence of pathogenic organisms in the water (bacteria, viruses, worms). According to WHO, up to 80 percent of diseases and more than one-third of deaths in developing countries are, at least in part, attributable to the consumption of contaminated water.

According, again, to WHO, one-third of the world's population still has no access to safe drinking water at an affordable price, and half of the world's population has no access to sanitation and sewage facilities. Around 285 million people live in sub-Saharan Africa without regular access to unpolluted water; 248 million in South Asia likewise; 398 million in East Asia; 180 million in Southeast Asia and the Pacific; 92 million in Latin America and the Caribbean; and 67 million in the Arab countries. And it is, of course, the most impoverished who suffer the most from the lack of water.

From the point of view of the planet's water reserves, the production, every year, of tens of billions of liters of biofuels constitutes

a veritable catastrophe. It takes, in fact, four thousand liters of water to produce one liter of bioethanol. And it is not Noël Mamère or some other reputedly "doctrinaire" ecologist who makes this claim, but Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, president of the biggest food corporation in the world, Nestlé.

In addition, a detailed study by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, whose membership comprises most of the industrialized nations, has calculated that the amount of fossil fuel needed to produce one liter of biofuel is very considerable indeed. And as the *New York Times* has noted soberly, given the great quantity of energy required in their production, "a large-scale effort across the world to grow crops for biofuels would add carbon dioxide to the atmosphere rather than reduce it."

## BARACK OBAMA'S OBSESSION

By far the most powerful producers of biofuels in the world are U.S.-based multinational corporations. Each year, they receive many billions of dollars in government aid. President Barack Obama has discussed biofuels as part of a critically important national “clean energy” strategy. In his State of the Union speech in 2011, Obama said, “With more research and incentives, we can break our dependence on oil with biofuels”—clearly, the bioethanol and biodiesel programs constitute an essential national security priority.

In 2011, subsidized with \$6 billion in public funds, the American biofuel companies will have burned 38.3 percent of the national corn harvest, up from 30.7 percent in 2008. And since 2008, the price of corn on the world market has risen by 48 percent. (In 2008, the American companies burned 138 million tons of corn, which equals 15 percent of world consumption.)

The United States is also by far the most dynamic and most important industrial power on the planet. Despite a relatively small population of about 313 million, compared to more than 1.34 billion in China and 1.17 billion in India, the United States produces slightly more than 25 percent of all the industrial goods manufactured annually on the planet. The primary material of this impressive machine is oil. The United States burns on average

20 million barrels of oil per day, or about one-quarter of world production; 61 percent of this volume, or a little more than 12 million barrels a day, is imported. Only 8 million barrels are produced in the United States, in Texas, offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, and in Alaska.

For the American president, this dependence on foreign oil is obviously a preoccupation. And even more worrying, the bulk of this imported oil comes from parts of the world where political instability is endemic, where Americans are not liked, and, in short, where production and export to the United States are not guaranteed. As a consequence of this dependence, the government in Washington must maintain in these regions, especially in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and Central Asia, a very expensive military presence, on land, at sea, and in the air.

In 2009, for the first time, expenditures on armaments by UN member nations (beyond budget allocations for maintenance of their militaries per se) exceeded \$1 trillion. Of this amount, the United States by itself accounted for 41 percent of the total (China, with the world’s second-largest military, accounted for 11 percent). American taxpayers also pay for \$3 billion in military aid to Israel annually. Furthermore, they finance very expensive military bases in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. Despite the magnificent Egyptian people’s revolution in 2011, Egypt remains an American protectorate. And U.S. taxpayers send \$1.3 billion to the generals in Cairo. It must be understood, moreover, that if President Obama wants to have the slightest chance of funding his social programs, especially reform of the U.S. health care system, he must, urgently and massively, reduce the budget of the Pentagon. Yet this budgetary reduction is possible only by substituting, as much as possible, fuel from plant sources (produced in the United States) for fossil fuels (mostly imported).

George W. Bush was the initiator of the biofuels program. In January 2007, he set the following goals: in ten years, the United States should reduce by 20 percent its consumption of fossil fuels and increase by a factor of seven its production of biofuels, from a

2007 level of production of slightly less than about 18 billion liters (nearly 5 billion gallons).

Burning millions of tons of food on a planet where a child under age ten dies of hunger every five seconds is obviously appalling. Spokespersons for the agri-food corporations try to defend the industry against criticism. They do not deny that it is morally questionable to divert food from its primary purpose and to use it as raw material for fuel production. But we have no cause to worry, they promise us. Soon there will be a "second generation" of biofuels produced from agricultural by-products, wood shavings, and plants such as species of the *Jatropha* genus that grow only on arid land (where no production of food crops is possible). And already, they add, production techniques allow the corn stalk to be processed for fuel without damaging the grain. Perhaps, but at what price?

The word *generation* evokes biology, suggesting a logical and necessary progression. But such terminology is, in this instance, very deceptive. Because if the possibility of so-called second-generation biofuels does indeed exist, their production is clearly going to be more expensive than the first generation's, owing to the need to separate out the fuel-producing components of the plants involved rather than using the entire plant, as well as other intermediate steps required in processing. And as a result, in a market dominated by the principle of profit maximization, these second-generation biofuels will play only a marginal role.

The gas tank of a midsize car burning bioethanol holds 50 liters (about 13 gallons). To produce that much bioethanol, 358 kilograms (789 pounds) of corn must be destroyed. In Mexico, in Zambia, corn is the staple food. A Mexican or Zambian child could live off 358 kilograms of corn for a year.

In my view, to invoke a phrase widely used by diverse critics of the industry, the question of biofuels can be summed up as this choice: full gas tanks or empty stomachs.

## THE CURSE OF SUGARCANE

Not only do biofuels devour every year hundreds of millions of tons of corn, wheat, and other foodstuffs; not only does their production send millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere; but, in addition, biofuel production causes social disasters in the countries where the global corporations that produce them become dominant. Consider the example of Brazil.

The jeep advances with difficulty over the rutted roadway that winds through the Capibaribe valley. The heat is suffocating. The green ocean of sugarcane stretches away to infinity. James Thorlby is sitting in the front seat, beside the driver. We are advancing into enemy territory. In the valley, many *engenhos* (sugarcane plantations) are being occupied by members of the MST, the Landless Rural Workers' Movement. The sugar barons have close ties to the military police, which are in effect a federal police force. Not to mention the death squads, the plantation gunmen, who prowl throughout the region.

Thorlby is Scottish and a priest. From Bahia to Piau , all over the northeast, he is known as Padre Tiago (from Santiago, the Portuguese equivalent of James). His friend Chico Mendez has been assassinated. Thorlby is still alive. For the time being at least, he adds. Tiago has a macabre sense of humor: "I prefer to sit in front. The gunmen are superstitious. . . . They are more afraid



to shoot at a priest than a socialist from Geneva." However, so far only swarms of mosquitoes have attacked us.

The sun sets red behind the horizon as, at last, we arrive within sight of the plantation. Hiding the vehicle in the bushes, we continue on foot, Thorlby, a union organizer, Sally-Anne Way, Christophe Golay, and I. The little adobe houses where the cane cutters live with their families, all painted blue, line both sides of a muddy rivulet. The entrance to each house is elevated: you have to climb three steps to get to the little stone terrace on which the house is built. The system is clever: it protects the inhabitants from rats and from sudden floods of the nearby stream.

The children—some *caboclo* (of mixed European and indigenous ancestry), some Afro-Brazilian, and some with more pronounced indigenous facial features—are happy despite a degree of undernutrition that we can see immediately in the thinness of their arms and legs. Many of them have the belly swollen by worms and the thin, reddish hair that are symptoms of kwashiorkor. The women are poorly dressed, with ebony-colored hair framing bony faces with hard eyes. Few of the men have all their teeth. Tobacco has stained their hands deep yellow.

Colored hammocks hang crisscross beneath the beamed ceilings. Parrots perch in their cages beneath the eaves. Behind the houses donkeys bray. Brown goats gambol in the meadows of sparse grass. The smell of roasted corn fills the air. The mosquitoes make a dull noise, like distant bombers.

The struggle of the workers of the Trapiche *engenho* is a good example of the overall struggle. The vast fields that disappear in the evening mist were formerly state-owned land, or *terra da União*. The land now controlled by the plantation consisted, only a few years ago, of subsistence farms comprising one or two hectares (2.5 to 5 acres). The families who worked these farms were poor, but they lived in safety, with a certain level of well-being and in relative freedom.

With a considerable amount of capital at their disposal, and because they enjoyed excellent relations with the federal government in Brasília, financiers were able to get the relevant authorities to

“downgrade” the land, that is, to privatize it. The small farmers who lived here, growing beans and cereals, were forced off the land and driven to the shantytowns of Recife, except for those who agreed, for wretched wages, to become cane cutters. Today, the cane cutters are severely exploited.

A long judicial process undertaken by the MST against the new proprietors had ended with a decision in favor of the landowners shortly before our visit. The local judges were no more impervious than the politicians in Brasília to the financial advantages—for them—of the privatization of public lands.

In Brazil, the program of biofuel production enjoys absolute priority. And sugarcane constitutes one of the most profitable raw materials for the production of bioethanol. The Brazilian program that aims to accelerate the rate of bioethanol production has an odd name: Pro-alcohol (or the National Alcohol Program). It is a source of pride for the government. In 2009, Brazil consumed 14 billion liters (3.7 billion gallons) of bioethanol and biodiesel and exported 4 billion liters (1.06 billion gallons). The government’s dream: to export as much as 200 billion liters (52.8 billion gallons) per year.

The state energy company, Petrobras, is dredging new deep-water harbors at Santos, in São Paulo state, and in Guanabara Bay, in Rio de Janeiro state. Over the next ten years, Petrobras will invest \$85 billion in the construction of new port facilities. The federal government in Brasília wants to increase the amount of land under cultivation for sugarcane to 26 million hectares (more than 64 million acres). Against the bioethanol giants, the toothless cane cutters of the Trapiche plantation haven’t got a chance.

The implementation of the Brazilian Pro-alcohol plan has led to the rapid concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few Brazilian sugarcane barons and multinational companies. The biggest sugar-producing region in the state of São Paulo is Ribeirão Preto. Between 1977 and 1980, the average size of the properties there increased from 242 to 347 hectares (from 598 to 860 acres). The concentration of land ownership, and thus of economic power, in the hands of a few big companies and plantations has rapidly become widespread, and the process has accelerated

since 2002. This trend toward concentrated land holding obviously works to the detriment of small and medium-size family farms.

One FAO expert has written that the size of an average plantation in the state of São Paulo, which was 8,000 hectares (19,768 acres) in 1970, had increased to 12,000 hectares (29,653 acres) by 2008. Plantations comprising 12,000 acres or more in 1970 had reached an average size of 39,000 hectares (96,371 acres) or more by 2008. Plantations of 40,000 or 50,000 hectares (up to 123,553 acres) were (and are) not rare. Conversely, the average area of plantations under 1,000 hectares (2,471 acres) had fallen by 2008 to 476 hectares (1,176 acres). The concentration of land in the state of São Paulo not only is the result of the buying and selling of land but is frequently also caused by formerly independent farmers being forced by the big landowners to rent their land to the big plantations.

This reorientation of agriculture toward a model of monopoly capitalism has left behind on the sidelines those who have not had the means to buy farm machinery, agricultural inputs, and land, and thereby to embark on intensive sugarcane cultivation. These farmers excluded from the emerging model have endured great pressure to agree to rent or sell their land to big neighboring estates. The period from 1985 to 1996 saw no fewer than 5.4 million small farmers evicted from their land and the disappearance of 941,111 small and medium-size farms across Brazil.

The monopolization exacerbates inequality and increases rural poverty (as well as urban poverty caused by the effect of the rural exodus). Moreover, the exclusion of smallholders endangers the country's food security, since it is the small farms that guarantee food production. As for rural families headed by a woman, they have less easy access to land and suffer from increased discrimination.

In short, the development of "green gold" production on the agro-exporter model immensely enriches the sugar barons but little by little weakens small farmers, tenant farmers, and the *bóias-frias*. The program signs the death warrant for the small and medium-size family farm—and thereby for the country's food sovereignty.

Together with the Brazilian sugar barons, the Pro-alcohol program obviously profits the big foreign global corporations such

as Louis Dreyfus, Bunge, the Noble Group, and Archer Daniels Midland, as well as hedge funds run by such figures as George Soros and the sovereign funds of China. According to a report from the NGO Ethical Sugar, China and the state of Bahia have signed an agreement permitting China to open twenty ethanol factories in Recôncavo, a vast sugar-producing region stretching inland from the Bay of All Saints in Bahia, between 2011 and 2013. In a country such as Brazil, where millions of people are demanding the recognition of their right to own their own small plot of land, where food security is threatened, the monopolization of land by multinational corporations and sovereign funds constitutes an egregious scandal.

At the UNHRC and before the UN General Assembly I fought against the Pro-alcohol plan. Opposing me was Paulo Vanucci, a friend, a former guerilla of the VAR-Palmares, and a hero of the resistance against the Brazilian dictatorship. He was truly sorry. Even President da Silva, during his appearance before the council in 2007, attacked me specifically by name from the rostrum. Vanucci and Lula had one killer argument in their arsenal: "Why worry about the expansion of the ocean of sugarcane? Ziegler is the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. But the Pro-alcohol plan has nothing to do with food. Sugarcane is not edible. Unlike the Americans, we Brazilians are burning neither corn nor wheat."

This argument is unacceptable, because the agricultural boundaries in Brazil are being permanently displaced: sugarcane is advancing toward the interior of the Brazilian Highlands, the country's heartland, located on the continental plateau, forcing herds of livestock that have grazed there for centuries to move west and north. In order to create new grazing lands, the plantations and directors of the global corporations that raise cattle are burning the forests—by tens of millions of hectares each year.

This destruction is irreparable. The soils of virgin forests in the Amazon Basin and the Mato Grosso in western Brazil have only a thin layer of humus. Even in the unlikely event that the government leaders in Brasília were to be seized by a sudden spell

of clear-sightedness, they could never re-create the Amazonian rainforest, justly known as the “planet’s lungs” because it plays an essential role in regulating not only the region’s precipitation but the climate of the entire planet. According to an estimate by the World Bank, at the current rate of slash-and-burn destruction of the forest to create rangeland, 40 percent of the Amazon rainforest will have disappeared by 2050.

To the extent that Brazil has increasingly substituted cultivation of sugarcane for food crops, it has joined the vicious circle of the international market in food: compelled to import the food products that it no longer produces itself, the country thereby increases world demand—which in turn leads to increased prices. The food insecurity in which a great part of the Brazilian population lives is thus directly linked to the Pro-alcohol program. The program particularly affects the sugarcane-growing regions, because there the consumption of staple foods depends almost entirely on the purchase of imported food products subject to wide fluctuations in prices. As David and Marcia Pimentel point out, many smallholders and agricultural workers are net buyers of food products because they do not own a sufficient amount of land to produce enough food for their families. This is why, in 2008, many Brazilian farmers and their families went hungry: they could not afford to buy enough food owing to the brutal explosion in food prices.

In the sugarcane fields of Brazil there still exist many practices that approach the enslavement seen in the period before 1888, when slavery was finally abolished in the country. Cutting cane is extraordinarily hard work. Cutters are paid by the job. Their only tool is a machete—and, if the foreman has a heart, they also wear leather gloves to protect their hands from abrasions. The minimum wage is rarely honored in the countryside.

And yet, owing to the Pro-alcohol program, the army of those laboring under the curse of sugarcane ceaselessly grows. Along with their families, the cane cutters migrate from one harvest to the next, from one plantation to the next. The sedentary cane cutters of the *Trapiche engenho* are today an exception. The

multinational corporations also prefer to employ migrant workers. They thereby save on obligatory contributions to social welfare programs and reduce their costs of production. This practice has severe social and human costs.

Anxious to reduce their costs, the producers of biofuels exploit migrant workers by the millions, according to an ultra-pro-free-market neoliberal capitalist model of agriculture: low wages, inhumane work hours, nearly nonexistent accommodations, and work conditions that approach slavery. These conditions have disastrous consequences for the health of the workers and their families. This is why the cutters, and even more their wives and children, often die from tuberculosis and undernutrition.

In Brazil there are 4.8 million rural workers *sem terra*. Many of these landless workers are on the road, without permanent homes, selling their labor according to the seasons. Those who live in villages or country towns, or in shacks on the edges of the big plantations, at least have access to a minimum of social services.

The transformation of vast regions into zones of sugarcane monoculture “casualizes” labor and makes employment insecure owing to the seasonal nature of the cane harvest. Once the harvest is done in the south, the workers must travel 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) from there to the northeast, where the seasons are reversed. In this way, they travel to find work every six months, covering immense distances. Far from their families, they are uprooted, more vulnerable than if they could work at home. The *bóias-frias*, who are not migratory, are no better off, never knowing how long they will be employed—a day, a week, a month?

Such vulnerability, such mobility make it even harder for these workers to defend the few rights they do have. The cane workers are in general unable to report the frequent abuses committed by their employers. Moreover, the legislation that should protect them is almost nonexistent:

Many live and suffer much as their ancestors did—as slaves on sugar plantations. Government investigators occasionally liberate a handful of cane workers, but in such a big

country the officials are few and far between. The real power lies in the hands of militias, or capangas, working for the sugar barons. . . . [A]nyone who makes trouble quickly finds himself face-to-face with the capangas, who crisscross the plantations in Jeeps and on dirt bikes. They carry radios and weapons. Officially, they are considered security guards who watch over the plantations. In reality, the capangas circle the workers like aggressive dogs encircling a herd.

Few women work in the cane fields, because it is very difficult for them to achieve the fixed targets of cutting ten or twelve tons of cane per day. However, according to the FAO, women who work on a seasonal basis or as day laborers, "due to existing social inequalities tend to be particularly disadvantaged, compared to men, in terms of wages, working conditions and benefits, training and exposure to safety and health risks." Thousands of children work on the plantations as well. In 2004, it was estimated that 2.4 million workers under age seventeen labored in Brazilian agriculture, including 22,876 on sugarcane plantations.

Brazilian cane cutters' income is also threatened by mechanization. Although they are unusable in the rugged terrain of the northeast, mechanical sugarcane harvesters are replacing manual labor on many plantations in the state of São Paulo, the country's leading sugar-producing state; in 2010, 45 percent of the harvest there was mechanized.

Gilberto Freyre's famous book, *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, to which I have already referred, is a denunciation of the curse of sugarcane.

The story Freyre recounts dates back to the early days of the Portuguese colony, when Tomé de Souza, Brazil's first governor-general, sailed his caravel into the Bay of All Saints on March 29, 1549, and not long after established Salvador as the capital of the colony in Bahia. By the seventeenth century, sugarcane had inundated first the Recôncavo region, then the Capibaribe River valley in Pernambuco, and finally the coastal zones and all of rural

Sergipe and Alagoas. The sugar industry was at the foundation of the slavery-based economy. The *engenhos* were sheer hell for the slaves, but they constituted a source of phenomenal wealth for their masters.

The sugar monoculture ruined Brazil. Today, it has returned. Once again, the curse of sugarcane has descended upon Brazil.

#### POSTSCRIPT: HELL IN GUJARAT

The slavery-like conditions in which cane cutters work are not unique to Brazil. Thousands of migrant cutters in many other countries endure the same kind of exploitation.

The Bardoli Sugar Factory plantation in the Surat region of Gujarat, India, supplies the largest sugar factory in Asia. The vast majority of the men who work in the cane fields there are members of various Adivasi, indigenous tribal groups, famous for their baskets and furniture woven from reeds.

Living conditions on the plantation are horrifying: the food provided by the factory bosses is infested with worms, and there is lack of clean water as well as of wood for cooking. The Adivasi and their families live in shacks made from branches open to scorpions, snakes, rats, and wild dogs.

The irony of the situation is that, for fiscal reasons, the Bardoli Sugar Factory is registered as a cooperative. In India, one of the most restrictive laws is the one that regulates the obligations and public oversight of cooperatives, the Cooperative Societies Act of 1912, under which specific officials are appointed to oversee cooperatives. But the cane cutters never see those officials. The state government of Gujarat ignores their suffering.

Why don't the cutters appeal to the courts? The Adivasi are much too afraid of the *mukadams*, the labor contractors who hire the cutters for work on the plantation. The level of unemployment in Gujarat is so high that a cutter who makes the least complaint will be replaced within the hour by a more compliant worker.

## CRIMINAL RECOLONIZATION

During the sixteenth session of the UNHRC in March 2011, La Via Campesina, together with two other NGOs, the FoodFirst Information and Action Network (FIAN) and the Geneva-based Centre Europe-Tiers Monde, organized a side event, an informal consultation on the protection of farmers' rights, such as the rights to land, seed, water, and so on. The dauntless Pitso Montwedi, Chief Director for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs in South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation in Pretoria, declared on this occasion, "First they took our people, then they took our land . . . we are living through the recolonization of Africa."

The curse of "green gold" is in effect spreading today to many countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. (Brazil is the main seller of equipment for the production of biofuels.) Almost everywhere in the world, but above all in Asia and Latin America, the monopolization of land by biofuel corporations is accompanied by violence. Colombia provides the paradigmatic example.

Colombia is the world's fifth-largest producer of palm oil: 36 percent of the oil produced is exported, mainly to Europe. In 2005, 275,000 hectares (679,500 acres) were devoted to oil palm cultivation. Palm oil is used in the production of biofuel. One hectare (2.5 acres) produces about 5,000 liters (1,321 gallons) of biodiesel.

In practically every region of Colombia where oil palm has been planted, human rights violations have accompanied the planting of the trees: illegal appropriation of land, forced displacement of communities, targeted assassinations, disappearances. The scenario, repeated in almost every region affected, begins with the forced displacement of the local population, achieved by the "pacification" of the zone by paramilitary units in the pay of private global corporations. Between 2002 and 2007, 13,634 people, including 1,314 women and 719 children, were killed or disappeared essentially as a result of attacks by paramilitaries.

Here is just one example: In 1993, the Colombian government recognized, by passing its Ley 70 (Law Number 70), the property rights of the African-Colombian people who traditionally farm the land of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó river basins. The law stipulates that no one may acquire any substantial section of the 150,000 hectares (371,000 acres) encompassed by the two river basins without the consent of representatives of the communities affected. But the reality on the ground is entirely different. The farmers and their families have fled the paramilitaries. The global palm oil corporations plant their trees in peace.

The paramilitaries arrived in the region in 1997, leaving desolation in their wake: houses burned down, targeted assassinations, threats, massacres. Human rights organizations have documented between 120 and 150 assassinations and the forced displacement of 1,500 people. As soon as the people had been driven off their land, the corporations began to plant the first palms. In 2004, 93 percent of the common land of the communities in the region was occupied by oil palm plantations.

Here is another example: the long battle finally lost by the farming families of Las Pavas, which has been described by journalist Sergio Ferrari. There, the godfathers of organized crime joined with the plantation owners to dispossess a community of more than six hundred families of their land in the department of Bolívar in northern Colombia. The tragedy goes back to the 1970s, when the farmers were forced out by plantation owners who sold their parcels to Jesús Emilio Escobar, an uncle

of the drug lord Pablo Escobar. In 1997, Escobar abandoned the property and the community took back its land, where they cultivated rice, corn, and bananas. But six years later the farmers were once again evicted by the paramilitaries.

The courageous farmers of Las Pavas refused to merely stagnate in their displaced persons camp. Little by little, their families returned to Las Pavas. In 2006, they presented to the Ministry of Agriculture a demand for the recognition of their property rights. This was the moment that Escobar chose to dislodge the farmers' families by force once again, destroying their harvests and selling their land to the El Labrador Consortium (a joint venture of two companies, Aportes San Isidro and Tequendama), which specializes in the large-scale cultivation of oil palm.

In July 2009, the farmers, who continued to cultivate part of their lands despite threats, were one more evicted, this time by the police, an action that even the minister of agriculture himself deemed illegal. In 2011, a new president was in power in Bogotá, Juan Manuel Santos. His predecessor, Alvaro Uribe, was affiliated with the paramilitary death squads. Santos, for his part, is close to the social circles that include the plantation owners. The directors of the palm oil companies, in particular those who run Tequendama, are his friends. The farmers of Las Pavas and their families have not the slightest chance of obtaining justice.

Consider what is happening in another part of the world, Africa. In Angola, the government has announced projects designating 500,000 hectares (1,235,500 acres) for the cultivation of biofuel crops. The effects of these projects will coincide with the massive expansion of the banana and rice monocultures led by the multinationals Chiquita and Lonrho, as well as by certain Chinese companies. In 2009, Biocom (Companhia de Bioenergia de Angola) began to plan sugarcane on a 30,000-hectare (74,100-acre) site. Biocom is partners with the Brazilian Odebrecht conglomerate and the Angolan companies Damer and Sonangol (the Angolan state petroleum company).

The Portuguese firm Quifel Natural Resources plans for

its part to cultivate sunflower, soy, and jatropha in the equatorial province of Cunene. The company plans to export the harvests to Europe, where they can be transformed into biofuels. The Portuguese company Gleinol has produced agrodiesel on 13,000 hectares (32,100 acres) since 2009. Sonangol, in association with the Italian petroleum consortium ENI, plans to expand its existing plantations of oil palm in the province of Kwanza-Norte to produce biofuels.

In Cameroon, Socapalm (Société Camerounaise de Palmeraies; Cameroon Palm Plantations Company), formerly a state-owned enterprise, is today partially owned by the French group Bolloré. Socapalm has announced its intention to expand palm oil production. The company owns palm plantations in the country's central, southern, and coastal regions. In 2000, it signed a sixty-year lease on 58,000 hectares (143,300 acres). Bolloré, in addition, directly owns the Sacafam (Société Agricole Forestière du Cameroon; Cameroon Agricultural and Forestry Company) plantation, with 8,800 hectares (21,700 acres).

In Cameroon, the oil palm plantations destroy virgin forests in the Congo River basin, aggravating further the long-term process of deforestation caused by the combined effects of forestry and clearing for agriculture. The federal government has since the 1960s supported the development of the palm oil industry through its state companies, Socapalm, the Cameroon Development Corporation, and the Compagnie des Oléagineux du Cameroun (Cameroon Oilseed Company). Yet the tropical forest of the Congo basin is the world's second-largest after the Amazon and constitutes one of the planet's principal carbon sinks (natural features, such as forests, oceans, peat bogs, and prairies, that absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere via photosynthesis, storing part of the absorbed carbon and returning oxygen to the atmosphere). It is important to understand also that numerous hunter-gatherer communities depend upon this forest and its rich biodiversity for their survival. As a result, these communities are risk of disappearing.

The government of Benin has proposed the conversion of

300,000 to 400,000 hectares (741,300 to 988,400 acres) of wetland areas into oil palm plantations in the southern part of the country. The oil palm is in fact a plant that originated in wetlands, but the palm plantations are going to drain the wetlands and destroy the rich biodiversity that they shelter.

But it is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that some of the biggest biofuel projects of all are under way. In July 2009, the Chinese company ZTE Agribusiness announced its intention to develop an oil palm plantation of 1 million hectares (2,471,000 acres) for the purpose of producing biofuels. ZTE had previously, in 2007, announced that it would invest up to \$1 billion in a new plantation covering 3 million hectares (7,413,000 acres). The Italian multinational company ENI, with 70,000 hectares (173,000 acres), also has a large oil palm plantation in the DRC.

The Marxist Ethiopian government is also launching enthusiastically into the alienation of its land. It has put nearly 1.6 million hectares (nearly 4 million acres) up for grabs for investors eager to develop sugarcane and palm oil plantations. By July 2009, 8,420 local and foreign investors had received the necessary authorizations to break ground.

In 2007, the Japanese company Biwako Bio-Laboratory was farming 30,000 hectares (74,100 acres) of *Jatropha curcas* in Kenya, with the goal of producing jatropha oil, and plans to expand its plantings to 100,000 hectares (247,100 acres) within ten years. Another company in Kenya, the Belgian corporation HG Consulting, provides financing for the Ngima project, which uses sugarcane grown by small farmers under contract working a total of 42,000 hectares (103,800 acres). The Canadian company Bedford Biofuels has acquired 160,000 hectares (395,300 acres) to plant jatropha, with an option for 200,000 hectares (494,200 acres) more.

In 2008, Marc Ravalomanana, the president of Madagascar (2002–9), concluded a secret agreement with the South Korean multinational Daewoo conglomerate agreeing to transfer 1 million hectares (2,471,000 acres) of arable land to the company's control. Daewoo would be granted this concession for ninety-nine

years entirely free of charge. Daewoo planned to plant oil palm to produce ethanol. The company's only obligation was to build roads, irrigation canals, and warehouses. On November 19, 2008, the *Financial Times* of London revealed the contents of the agreement. Ravalomanana was driven out of office by his enraged people. His successor canceled the contract.

Sierra Leone is the poorest country in the world. Addax Bioenergy, a private global company based in Lausanne, recently acquired a concession of 20,000 hectares (49,400 acres) of fertile land there. Addax wants to plant sugarcane to produce bioethanol for the European market. Addax belongs to Jean-Claude Gandur, a Swiss multimillionaire born in Azerbaijan, who made a colossal fortune in the petroleum industry. Joan Baxter visited the site of Addax's plantation in Sierra Leone, reporting:

Spread out among twenty-five villages in central Sierra Leone, small farmers produce their own seed and cultivate rice, manioc, and vegetables. Adama, who is planting manioc, tells me that the revenues she earns from her harvest will enable her to take care of the needs of her paralyzed husband and to pay the school fees for her three children. Charles, who returns home from the fields in the heat of late afternoon, will be able to send his three little kids to school thanks to what his small farm produces.

Next year, most of these farmers will not be able to cultivate their land. . . .

Adama does not yet know that she is soon going to lose the fields of manioc and pepper that she farms on the highlands. Gandur signed his contract with the government in Freetown. The farmers living in the twenty-five villages only heard about their impending ruin from hearsay.

The problem is common throughout sub-Saharan Africa. For rural land, there generally is no system of land registry; for land in urban areas, such systems exist only in a few cities. In theory, all land belongs to the state. Rural communities have only a right

of usufruct to the land they occupy, a right of use and enjoyment but not of ownership.

Gandur is a well-informed capitalist. He takes no risks. He got his project in Sierra Leone financed by the European Investment Bank and the African Development Bank. In Sierra Leone, as in numerous other countries in the southern hemisphere, these two banks (like others elsewhere) function as active accomplices in the destruction of African farming families' way of life. Three supplementary concessions are under negotiation between the government and Addax—again, with the support of the two public banks. These new concessions concern lands where gigantic oil palm plantations will be developed.

Sierra Leone is emerging from eleven years of horrifying civil war. Despite the end of combat in 2002, reconstruction is not progressing. Nearly 80 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, seriously and permanently undernourished.

Addax's feasibility study plans for the importation of machinery, trucks, and herbicide sprayers, and the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and fungicides. Addax chose the land it did for a specific reason: it is bounded by one of Sierra Leone's most important rivers, the Rokel. The contract includes no clause limiting the amount of water that Addax will be permitted to pump from the river to irrigate its plantations, nor specifying the uses to which wastewater may be put. The farmers of the entire region are threatened with a lack of water for drinking and for irrigation and with the danger of water pollution.

Formally, Gandur signed a contract renting the land for fifty years, for the cost of 1 euro per hectare (about 42 cents per acre). The contract promises Addax exemptions from personal income taxes and customs duties on imported materiel. Gandur is clever. He has linked his business to an influential local businessman with a long career in mining and oil, Vincent Kanu, as well as with Ibrahim Martin Bangura, the member of parliament for the district. On paper, Sierra Leone is a democracy. In fact, MPs reign over their constituencies like satraps in the ancient Persian Empire. Gandur gave Bangura the task of "explaining" details

of the project to the local people. According to Bangura, the dispossessed farmers will benefit, by way of compensation, from the four thousand jobs that Addax has promised to create. But an independent field study has proven that this promise is false. Few jobs are planned. Moreover, we might ask, jobs under what conditions? No one has said. There is, however, one indication. As of 2011, Addax was employing about fifty people to watch over the young shoots of sugarcane and manioc planted on the shores of the Rokel River. Addax paid them a daily wage of 10,000 leones, or about \$2.37.

Gandur's deal in Sierra Leone is typical of most of the acquisitions of land by the lords of green gold. And the corruption of local associates obviously plays a key role in the tactics of dispossession of local farmers. Adding to the scandal is that taxpayer-funded public banks such as the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, and the African Development Bank finance the confiscation of land.

What will become of Adama and Charles, their children, their extended families, their neighbors? They will be driven off their land. Where will they go? To the sordid shantytowns of Freetown, seething with rats, where children sell their bodies and their fathers waste away in permanent unemployment and despair.

Biofuels are catastrophic for society and the global climate. Their production reduces the amount of land available for food crops, destroys family farms, and increases world hunger. It sends great quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and sucks up an enormous volume of drinking water.

There is no doubt that the consumption of fossil fuels must be rapidly and massively reduced. However, the solution lies not in biofuels but rather in the reduction of energy consumption and in alternative sources of clean energy such as wind and solar.

Bertrand Piccard is one of the most radiantly optimistic men I know. From March 1 to 21, 1999, together with Brian Jones, he completed the first nonstop trip around the globe in a balloon. Today he is preparing to be the first to circle the Earth in a



100 percent solar-powered, piloted, fixed-wing aircraft, the *Solar Impulse*. Piccard once told me, smiling, "I want to contribute to liberating humanity from petroleum."

In 2007, before the UN General Assembly in New York, I declared, "To produce biofuels with food is criminal." I demanded that the practice be forbidden. The vultures of green gold reacted forcefully. The Canadian Renewable Fuels Association, the European Bioethanol Fuel Association, and the Brazilian Sugarcane Industry Association, three of the most powerful federations of bioethanol producers, sent representatives to Kofi Annan to denounce my declaration as "apocalyptic" and "absurd."

I have not changed my mind.

On a planet where a child under age ten dies of hunger every five minutes, to hijack land used to grow food crops and to burn food for fuel constitutes a crime against humanity.

## PART VI

### THE "TIGER SHARK" THE SPECULATORS

The tiger shark is a very large member of the family of lamniform sharks, and an extremely voracious carnivore. With its hyperth and hawk eyes, it is one of the most feared animals on the planet. It inhabits tropical and temperate oceans worldwide, with a preference for hunting in murky coastal waters. With its powerful jaws, the tiger shark can exert a pressure of several tons per square inch. Like most pelagic (or open-ocean) sharks, the tiger spends most of its life in motion, and is able to detect a tiny amount of blood in an enormous volume of water and follow a trail of blood to its source over a distance of at least 0.6 kilometers (a quarter mile).

The speculator in food commodities trading on the Chicago Commodity Stock Exchange corresponds rather well to the description of the tiger shark. He too is capable of detecting his victims across great distances and of killing them in an instant, all while satisfying his voracious appetite—or, in other words, realizing colossal profit.

The laws of the market work in such a way that only buyers demand is fulfilled; that is, only buyers who can pay will have their needs met. Opposing these laws requires willfully ignoring the fact that food is a human right, a right for all.

The speculator in food commodities stacks up all kinds and forms of everything that might yield him some advantage: he goes to

## THE "TIGER SHARKS"

The tiger shark is a very large member of the family of carcharhinid sharks, and an extremely voracious carnivore. With its big teeth and black eyes, it is one of the most feared animals on the planet. It inhabits tropical and temperate oceans worldwide, with a preference for hunting in murky coastal waters. With its powerful jaws, the tiger shark can exert a pressure of several tons per square inch. Like most pelagic (or open-ocean) sharks, the tiger spends most of its life in motion, and is able to detect a tiny amount of blood in an enormous volume of water and follow a trail of blood to its source over a distance of at least 0.4 kilometer (a quarter mile).

The speculator in food commodities working on the Chicago Commodity Stock Exchange corresponds rather well to the description of the tiger shark. He too is capable of detecting his victims across great distances and of killing them in an instant, all while satisfying his voracious appetite—or, in other words, realizing colossal profits.

The laws of the market work in such a way that only solvent demand is fulfilled; that is, only buyers who can pay will have their needs met. Obeying these laws requires willfully ignoring the fact that food is a human right, a right for all.

The speculator in food commodities attacks on all fronts and devours everything that might yield him some advantage: he gambles

especially on land, agricultural inputs, seed, fertilizer, credit, and foodstuffs. But speculation is a hazardous activity. Speculators can realize in a few seconds a gigantic profit or lose colossal sums.

Two examples: Jérôme Kerviel, a young trader with Société Générale, took positions starting in late 2006 on European stock index futures worth nearly 50 billion euros (\$73.6 billion at the January 2008 average exchange rate), an amount greater than the bank's total market capitalization. When his fraudulent trading was discovered in January 2008, Kerviel was accused of having lost 4.8 billion euros (\$7.07 billion) for the bank. By contrast, in 2009, the GAIA World Agri Fund managed by the Geneva-based GAIA Capital Advisors, one of the fiercest speculators in agri-food equities, realized a net return on investments of 51.85 percent.

The classic definition of speculation was provided in 1939 by the Hungarian-born British economist Nicholas Kaldor. Speculation, Kaldor writes, is

the purchase (or sale) of goods with a view to re-sale (or re-purchase) at a later date, where the motive behind such action is the expectation of a change in the relevant prices . . . and not a gain accruing through their use, or any kind of transformation effected in them or their transfer between different markets.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) gives an even simpler definition: "Speculation is the assumption of the risk of loss in return for the uncertain possibility of a reward."

What distinguishes the speculator from any other economic actor is that he buys nothing for his own use. The speculator buys a good—a consignment (or lot) of rice, wheat, corn, oil, and so on—in order to resell it later or immediately with the intention, if the price varies, of repurchasing it later. The speculator is not the cause of price rises, but, as a result of his intervention in the market, he accelerates their upward movement.

There are three categories of operators in the stock market: hedge fund operators, who try to protect themselves against risks

linked to variations in asset prices (stock market prices, exchange rates); arbitrageurs, whose activity consists in trading securities (or foreign currencies) with the aim of realizing a profit on the differences in interest rates or asset prices; and, last of all, speculators.

The financial instruments par excellence of the speculator in agricultural commodities are the derivatives and futures contracts (also called forward contracts). A word on their origins. According to Olivier Pastré, one of the leading experts in this area,

the first derivatives markets were created at the beginning of the twentieth century in Chicago, to aid Midwestern farmers to protect themselves against the erratic fluctuations in commodities prices. But this new type of financial product has, since the beginning of the 1990s, been transformed, from the insurance products that they once were into a product of pure speculation. In barely three years, from 2005 to 2008, the proportion of activity by noncommercial actors in the corn markets increased from 17 to 43 percent.

Agricultural products were bought and sold on world markets for a long time without major problems until 2005. So why did everything so radically change in 2005?

First, the market in agricultural products is very specific. Again, according to Pastré,

this market is a market of surplus and excess. Only a tiny part of agricultural production is exchanged on international markets. Thus, international trade in cereals represents barely more than 10 percent of production of all crops combined (7 percent for rice). A very small change in world production one way or the other can thus have a drastic effect on the market. A second factor unique to the market in agricultural products is that while demand (consumption) is very rigid, supply (production) is very fragmented (and therefore incapable of being organized and of exerting pressure on changes in prices) and subject more than any other market to climatic fluctuations.

These two factors explain the extreme volatility of market prices, a volatility that speculation only amplifies.

Until recently, most speculators operated in financial markets. In 2007, these markets imploded: trillions of dollars' worth of assets were destroyed. In the West, but also in Southeast Asia, tens of millions of men and women lost their jobs. Governments reduced their social expenditures. Hundreds of thousands of small and medium-size businesses went bankrupt. Anxiety about the immediate future and social and financial insecurity became a way of life in Paris, Berlin, Geneva, London, Rome, and many other places. Some cities, such as Detroit and Rüsselsheim, were devastated. In the southern hemisphere, tens of millions more people sank into the torments of undernutrition, the illnesses associated with hunger, and death by starvation.

The stock market predators, on the other hand, were largely bailed out by their governments. Public funds financed their lavish bonuses, their Ferraris, their Rolexes, their private helicopters, and their luxurious homes in Florida, Switzerland's Zermatt, and the Bahamas. In short, with the Western governments having shown themselves incapable of imposing any legal limits on speculators, banditry in the banking sector flourishes today as never before. But in the aftermath of the implosion of the financial markets, which the markets themselves caused, the most dangerous of the tiger sharks, above all the American hedge fund managers, migrated to markets in raw materials, especially to the agri-food markets.

The areas in which speculators can operate are almost unlimited. All the goods produced on the planet may become the objects of speculative bets on the future. In this chapter, I will concentrate on one kind of speculation, that which affects the prices of food, especially staple foods, and the prices of arable land.

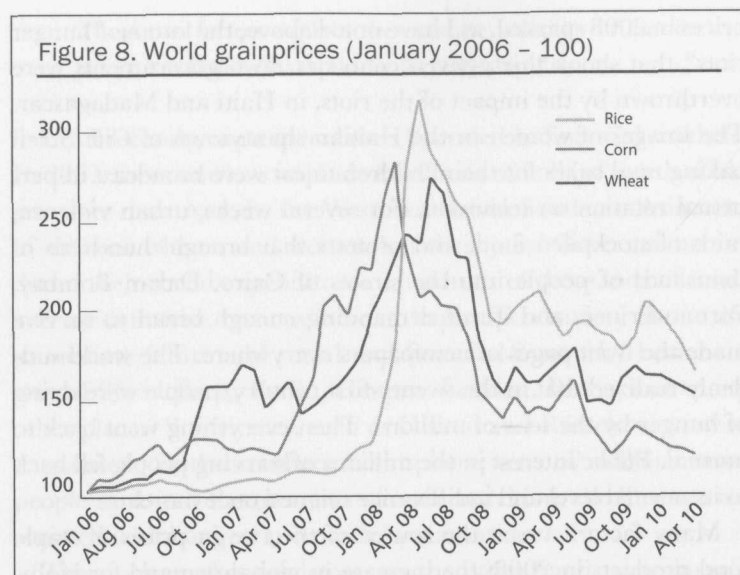
What are called staple foods—rice, corn, and wheat—account for 75 percent of total world food consumption (rice alone accounts for 50 percent). Twice in recent years, in 2008 and 2011, speculators have caused a sudden spike in food prices. The spike in staple food

prices in 2008 sparked, as I have noted above, the famous "hunger riots" that shook thirty-seven countries. Two governments were overthrown by the impact of the riots, in Haiti and Madagascar. The images of women in the Haitian shantytown of Cité Soleil baking mud cakes for their children to eat were broadcast in perpetual rotation on television. For several weeks, urban violence, raids of stockpiled food, and protests that brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets of Cairo, Dakar, Bombay, Port-au-Prince, and Tunis demanding enough bread to survive made the front pages of newspapers everywhere. The world suddenly realized that in the twenty-first century, people were dying of hunger by the tens of millions. Then everything went back to normal. Public interest in the millions of starving people fell back to its normal level and indifference reigned once more.

Many factors are at the source of the rise in prices of staple food products in 2008: the increase in global demand for biofuels; drought, and the resulting poor harvests in certain regions; the lowest level of world stockpiles in cereals in thirty years; the increased demand in emerging countries for meat and therefore grain; the elevated price of oil; and, above all, speculation.

Let us consider the crisis of 2008 in more detail. The market in agricultural products reflects the equilibrium between supply and demand, and is affected by the rhythms of whatever affects these forces, such as climatic fluctuations, which constantly alter this equilibrium. This is why a minor incident in one corner of the planet, because of its eventual repercussions on the global volume of food production (decreasing supply), at the same time as the world's population continues to grow (increasing demand), may have considerable repercussions on the markets and cause spike in prices.

The crisis of 2008 is thought by some to have been unleashed by El Niño, beginning in 2006. Whether or not this is true, when we consider the fluctuations in the global prices of grains in the following graph, we can see clearly that prices began to rise steadily in 2006 and then shot up in 2008, spiking to extremely high peaks. In 2008, the FAO's price index reached an average 24 percent higher than in 2007, and 57 percent higher than in 2006.



As Philippe Chalmin explains,

in March [2008] in Chicago, wheat of standard grade approached \$500 per ton. In Minneapolis, a superior grade, Dark Northern Spring Wheat, even reached \$800. In the Mediterranean, hard wheat, the type from which pasta and couscous are made, cost more than \$1,000. . . . But the crisis was not limited to wheat. The other most important subsistence cereal, rice, followed nearly the same price curve, seeing prices rise in Bangkok from \$250 to \$1000 per ton.

As for corn, the American bioethanol industry and the approximately \$6 billion in annual subsidies to the producers of green gold considerably reduced U.S. supply to the world market. Moreover, since corn is an important contributor to livestock feed, its scarcity on the markets, while demand for meat was (and still is) increasing, also contributed to the rise in prices in 2006. Under normal circumstances, the global cereals harvest reaches about 2 billion tons, of which about one-quarter goes to feed livestock. An increase in demand for meat thus necessarily causes a substantial reduction in

the amount of cereal available on the market. Then, in 2008, floods struck the American corn belt, the breadbasket of the American Midwest, especially in Iowa, further increasing the price of corn.

Chalmin shows the twin dimensions—economic and moral—of the activity of speculators operating in the markets for agricultural commodities: “That speculation on the prices of wheat is allowed may seem shocking, even immoral, and it reminds us of an entire history of monopolization and manipulation of prices to the profit of a few dubious financiers.” But for the speculators, agricultural products are products on the market like any others. They show no particular consideration for the consequences that their activity may have on millions of human beings as a result of increased prices. They’re just “going bull,” betting that prices will rise, that’s all.

In the event, the tiger sharks were a little late in smelling blood. But as soon as they had spotted their prey, they attacked vigorously. Laetitia Clavreul describes what happened:

The hedge funds rushed into the agricultural markets, causing an increase in volatility. . . . Agricultural commodities have become commonplace as objects of market activity. Starting in 2004, the hedge funds began to get interested in this sector, which they judged to be undervalued; this explains the development of the futures markets. In Paris, the number of wheat contracts rose from 210,000 to 970,000 between 2005 and 2007.

Speculation in food products reached such proportions that even the U.S. Senate was worried. The Senate denounced “excessive speculation” in the wheat markets, criticizing especially the fact that some commodity index traders were holding up to 53,000 contracts at one time. The Senate also criticized the fact that “six commodity index traders are currently authorized to hold a total of up to 130,000 wheat contracts at a time, instead of up to 39,000 contracts, or one-third less if standard position limits were applied.”

Confronted with the insane surge in prices, the major exporting countries closed their borders. Fearing undernutrition and hunger