

# Drought, sand threaten inhabitants of Sahara

By DAVID MARTIN  
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DAKAR, Senegal — Trapped in a vise between the inexorably advancing sands of the Sahara to the north and the rains moving up from the south, several million Africans and the remnants of their once mighty herds are clinging precariously to life.

Successive years of drought have turned the Sahelian zone, which stretches across the

continent to the south of the Sahara, into a massive dustbowl. The rotting carcasses of thousands of cattle pockmark the cracked landscape. Rivers have shrunk to mere streams and in places the waters of Lake Chad have receded up to 12 miles.

Relief workers describe this as a "creeping disaster" that in the next few months could kill over 2 million Africans living in Mauritania, Senegal, Mali,

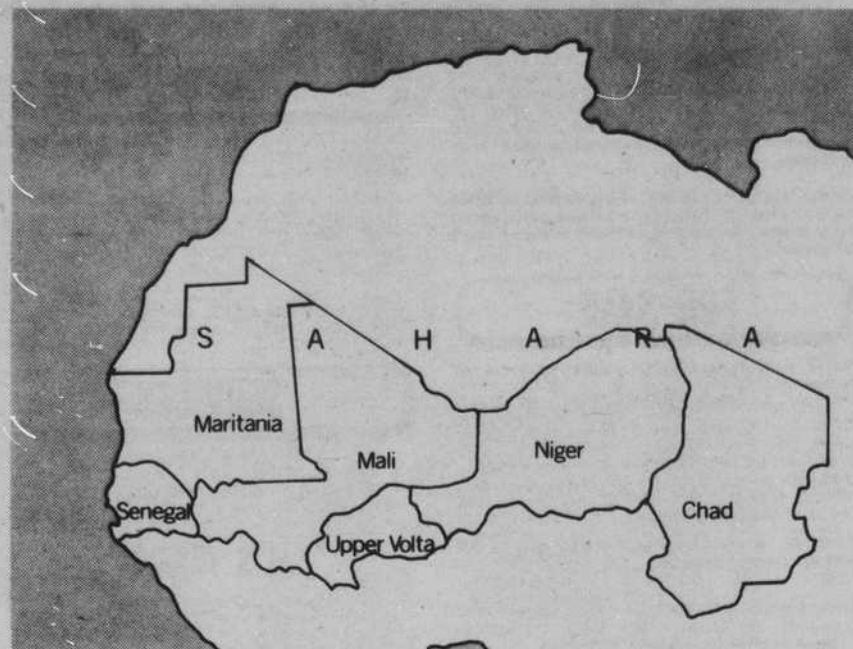
Upper Volta, Niger and Chad. These six countries have been declared a disaster area, but many others across the continent are suffering from the aftermath of drought, including Dahomey, Togo, northern parts of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

Just how many people and cattle have already died is not known. Initial statistics from the Food and Agricultural Organization put the total of dead cattle, sheep and goats at several million, but it is now clear that figures are exaggerated.

The worst affected of the six countries in the disaster area is Mauritania. Relief workers believe that up to 80 per cent of the country's 1.2 million people could be affected by famine in the next few weeks.

So desperate is the search for water that camels worth more than \$300 are reported to have been killed by their owners puncturing their humps for water. In Upper Volta, herdsmen have been squeezing out the dung of their emaciated animals for water.

The people hardest hit are largely nomadic herdsmen of the desert. A few months ago, Ba Ahmadou, for instance, was a comparatively wealthy man who owned 200 cattle worth \$15,000. Now their carcasses lie in the desert. He and 2,000 other people are huddled together in a new



village at Mederdra in the desert in northwest Mauritania, 40 miles from the nearest road.

The population of Nouakchott, the capital, has grown by many thousands and a huge tented camp has sprung up. Ehel Idi and his family of 33 are among those who have arrived there, abandoning the harsh desert. Early this year he owned 300 cattle, 50 sheep and 60 goats. Today only 10 sheep and a goat are left alive.

The first report of starvation in the region came from neighboring Mali in mid-June; 78 people are said to have died between Timbuktu and Gao on the River Niger. Three American transport planes have been flying relief supplies north to distribution centers, but there is insufficient transport to move it on to the estimated 700,000 people living in the arid desert area north of Timbuktu.

Mali poses major problems for the relief workers. Like Upper Volta, Niger and Chad, it is landlocked, increasing the difficulties of moving emergency food into the country. Almost 40,000 tons of relief supplies for Mali have piled up in the port here, and the archaic railways from Dakar to Bamako, the Mali capital, can carry a maximum of only 1,500 tons a week.

Other supplies are being moved in through the Ivory Coast capital, Abidjan, but the ad-

vancing rains are already making roads difficult for large trucks on that route.

The possibility of 2 million people dying of starvation in the next few weeks seems slight. But certainly well over 2 million people across the north of these six countries, although inured to their unequal battle with the elements, are short of food, weakened and vulnerable to disease.

The rains could mean the killer punch if they make roads impassable. In these circumstances it might be necessary to provide food through parachute drops. Ideally what is needed is a steady but light downpour which would allow planting to begin and the distribution of relief to continue. But little is ever ideal in this environment.

Jim Markin, American assistant program director of the Catholic Relief Service, is among the handful of relief workers who view the present aid operation with trepidation. He argues that the people are sufficiently hardened to their climatic burdens to survive. The current relief operation, he believes, could in fact ultimately create greater famine, for it prevents critical long-term decisions from being made.

While few relief workers would accept this short-term view, the long-term needs are unanimously endorsed. Each year the Sahara is creeping deeper into Africa, with the livestock, particularly goats, destroying the environment of the desert's southern fringes.

A regional program of reforestation is needed to build a green wall against the Sahara's encroachment. Undoubtedly it would cost millions of dollars, but in the long term it would prove cheaper than the provision of emergency supplies on an increasing scale year after year.

In the north of the desert, Algeria is to begin building a "green wall" in the autumn comprising millions of pine, eucalyptus and other trees stretching from the borders with Morocco and Tunisia.

But the greatest danger in the Sahelian zone today is that once the present crisis fades the aid donors will forget about it until the next appeal.

## ... while Thai rain-makers take their business on the road

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

BANGKOK — Thai rain-makers are planning two overseas trips later this year, one to West Germany and the other to Australia.

Theparit Devakul, whose rain-making techniques are reputed to be successful, said the visits would be their first demonstration trips abroad.

Theparit, however, said the group would not be showing the Germans how to make artificial rain, "but how to disperse the fog at Frankfurt Airport" using techniques developed in Thailand.

He said the forthcoming trips demonstrated the growing interest among foreign governments in the rain-making techniques developed and proved in Thailand. It is reported that several hundred thousand acres of maize were saved from drought damage early this month as a result of artificial rain produced by Theparit's operation.



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