

What kind of independence do we want? **July 2007. By Rania Masri. Published in Al-Adab.**

“Dollar for dollar, [the United States] exports more meat than steal, more corn than cosmetics, more wheat than coal, more bakery products than motorboats, and more fruits and vegetables than household appliances.”¹ Such was the status of U.S. agricultural exports in 2001 as stated by Mattie Sharpless, then Acting Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Nevertheless, the USDA wasn't content. A greater push into new markets is necessary, she had argued.

By 2007, the U.S. world market share had reached 19 percent – almost one-fifth of world agriculture trade.² During the past year and a half alone, the U.S. concluded trade agreements with Colombia, Panama Peru, and South Korea to “provide greater access for all U.S. agricultural products.”³

Nevertheless, the USDA is still not content. “We cannot rest on our accomplishments. We must continue to expand access to overseas markets, where 95 percent of the world's consumers live.”⁴

And how is the U.S. planning to invade and conquer additional agricultural markets?

By increasing “food aid programs”⁵ and by pushing for the reduction of “barriers to trade in various ways, primarily through multilateral negotiations, originally under the auspices of the GATT (1947-94) and now under the WTO (1995-present),” and by negotiating “a number of regional and bilateral trade agreements.”⁶

What does that mean? Let's break it down.

Food aid.

Here we have a situation where the U.S. ‘generously’ gives of its own food supply to feed the hungry in their times of need. In the past few years, the Food for Peace program, funded by the USDA and administered by USAID, has alleviated the consequences of the 2004 Asian tsunami, a 2005 food crisis in Niger, a 2006 food shortage in East Africa, and the 2006 July War in Lebanon. Last year alone, the U.S. gave the UN World Food Program \$1.2 billion in food – “more than any other country and 43 percent of the group's food stocks.”⁷

Altruistic? Not at all.

Under the Food for Peace program, the U.S. purchases only grain and other food produced in the U.S., and then ships 75 percent of that load on U.S.-flagged ships. Thus, the \$1 billion-plus dollars in ‘food aid’ translates into more than \$2.7 billion in economic activity in the U.S.⁸

This program is thus an extensive U.S. domestic subsidy for agribusiness. And it is more.

Let us remember. Food aid, which began as Public Law 480 of 1954, was designed “to make maximum efficient use of surplus agricultural commodities in furtherance of the foreign policy of the US.”⁹

¹ Statement of Mattie R. Sharpless, Acting Administrator, Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture before the U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee, the Subcommittee on Production and Price Competitiveness. August 1, 2001. <http://www.tradeobservatory.org/headlines.cfm?refID=16673>

² Statement of W. Kirk Miller, General Sales Manager, Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture before the House Small Business Committee. June 13, 2007. <http://www.fas.usda.gov/info/speeches/ct061307miller.pdf>

³ Statement of Michael W. Yost, Administrator of the Foreign Agricultural Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture. May 10, 2007. <http://www.fas.usda.gov/info/speeches/ct051007yost.pdf>

⁴ Yost. 2007.

⁵ Sharpless. 2001.

⁶ USDA. Strengthening the foundation for future growth in U.S. Agriculture. Executive Summary. September 2006.

⁷ Stephen J. Hedges. ‘U.S. food aid reform plan has stout foes.’ Chicago Tribune. May 31, 2007. <http://www.ohio.com/mld/ohio/17302851.htm>

⁸ Hedges. 2007.

⁹ Clare Fremont. ‘Hurting not helping.’ Socialist Review. Issue 214. December 1997. <http://www.netnomad.com/socrev.html>