



INTERNATIONAL PANEL—Discussing the World Food Crisis during a panel session Monday sponsored by the Peres Peace Center were from left, moderator and journalist Nitzan Horowitz; Sam Pohoryles, deputy director of the Peres Peace Center; microbiologist Ilan Chet of Hebrew University; former Palestinian Authority Agriculture Minister Walid Abed-Rabbah; Green Cross International President Alexander Likhotal; Hansen Institute for World Peace Executive Director Bonnie Stewart; Barilla Companies Chairman Guido Barilla, and Faud Abou-Hadad, director general of Egypt's ministry of agriculture

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Peace-making, solving world food shortage are interrelated necessities

By Donald H. Harrison



TEL AVIV—A video address from Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, set the tone Monday for a Peres Peace Center panel on the urgency of solving the food crisis in the Middle East and other “food-stressed” areas of the globe.

Sachs told delegates at the 10th anniversary conference of the Peres Peace Center that declining yields of crops lead to competition for resources, and sometimes, as in the case of Darfur, warfare. Many people forget that the killings—some say genocide—in that region developed after nomads in the northern part of the country, unable to find sufficient food, moved to the south, creating deadly competition for land.

Food shortages are not restricted to the Sudan, said Sachs. Similar crop conditions are being seen along a broad swath of Africa, as well as in other areas of the world, including the arid

countries of the Middle East. He urged Israel to bring its technological know-how to bear in food-stressed countries, helping them to cope with less productive soils and droughts by exporting drip irrigation methods, high yield seeds and improved fertilizer.

Other panelists offered suggestions for increasing crop yields. For example, Dr. Ilan Chet, a Hebrew university microbiologist and former president of the Weizmann Institute, said people should rid themselves of their fears about “genetically-engineered” foods, and instead support research to create high-yield, high-protein crops that could help feed a hungry world.

He described the so-called genetic engineering as a process similar to what nature has been doing through evolution. The difference, he suggested, was that the process is much quicker in laboratories and human needs can be taken into account. Grains could be created that won't absorb pesticides, thus preventing the poisons from being passed up the food chain. New foods could be produced with extra vitamin content.

Guido Barilla, chairman of the Italian pasta company that bears his name, urged better utilization of agricultural lands. Animal production, he said, takes more land and produces far less food benefit than the same lands turned over to wheat production. He also argued against the use of bio-fuels, saying crops are more desperately needed for feeding people. In this he echoed the comments of Samuel Pohoryles, deputy director of the Peres Peace Center, who said the amount of corn needed to produce fuel to fill one tank of an average size automobile is equal to what an African villager might eat in a year.

Alexander Likhotal, president and chief executive officer of Green Cross International, called for better development and utilization of the world's water resources, commenting that when people in wealthy countries use clean water wastefully they deny the possibility of exporting that water to people who need it the most, those in poor countries. The world needs to better manage its reservoir and aquifer levels, and it must come to realize that desalinization is cheaper than war.

Cooperation among nations in crop-raising practices, in use of advanced agricultural technology and in marketing foods may also contribute to easing the strain of worldwide food shortages while at the same time promoting peace among such longtime adversaries as the Arabs and the Israelis.

This point was driven home in separate presentations by Faud Abou-Hadad, director-general of Egypt's ministry of agriculture; Walid Abed-Rabbah, the Palestine Authority's former minister of agriculture, and Bonnie Stewart, executive director of the San Diego State University-based Hansen Institute for World Peace.

Stewart told of the Hansen Institute program that since the 1980s has brought Arabs and Israelis together to discuss cooperation in agricultural techniques—the meetings initially occurring at San Diego State University, under a grant from the Hansen Foundation, because the Middle Eastern participants' respective countries did not have diplomatic relations with each other.

Under the theory that common agricultural problems have common solutions, agricultural

experts of these countries developed working partnerships that eventually blossomed into cross-border friendships, according to Stewart. A maxim of both the Peres Peace Center and the Hansen Institute for World Peace is that positive person-to-person relationships are essential to building an enduring peace.

Abou-Hadad spoke of Egypt's gains in producing crops "that have shorter growing periods, decreased water needs and which are even able to be produced with saline water." Complimenting some of the agricultural practices in Israel's Negev, the director general said "their crops grow on land saltier than the sea."

Abel-Rabbah noted that Palestine and Israel are part of the same region, sharing the same watersheds and aquifers, and subject to the same kinds of agricultural diseases. Sharing the same land, "we need to take care of it."

But whereas cooperation in agriculture may help to build the peace, so too, on the Palestinian side, will peace help build agriculture. Abel-Rabbah said that "occupation, closures, settlements and seizures" all would come to an end, making the farmer's work easier.

About 50 percent of the agricultural lands in Palestine are utilized by olive groves, according to Abel-Rabbah. Along with the fact that olive branches are peace symbols, this was a factor in the decision by the Peres Peace Center/ Hansen Institute in choosing the olive as the first crop which Israelis and Palestinians might jointly market.

Stewart said that the intent is to create an olive oil blended from olives grown both in Israel and Palestine. Besides helping the growers, the project would create business opportunities for bottlers and distributors, enlarging the constituency for peace. If the concept proves workable, she said, cooperative marketing projects for such other crops as dates and tomatoes may be considered.

The project immediately drew a compliment from the panel's moderator, Nitzan Horowitz, an Israeli journalist. And Pohoryles of the Peres Peace Center said another project anticipates the planting of four million new olive trees in Palestine, Israel and Jordan.

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