Sales of food aid as sign of distress, not excess

To the editor of ENN Field Exchange:

We find Mr. Gettier's letter concerning our article, "Sales of food aid as sign of distress, not excess" (Field Exchange Issue 4), distressing. It raises several issues that we would like to address, including: reasons for the ration reduction in Uvira, overenumeration of the caseload, acceptable response to extortion by refugee 'terrorists', reasons for the appearance of donated maize and oil in the market, and the discrepancy between policy and its implementation.

Our claim that the ration cut in Uvira in March 1996 was due to donor dissatisfaction with refugee exchange of food aid was based on the reason given by WFP to UNHCR when they unilaterally implemented the cut. Normally decisions about ration levels are the joint responsibility of WFP and UNHCR, and an explanation was needed. The local WFP officer said that the donors were unhappy that so much food was being traded. The opinion was that the refugees had been in Uvira so long that they probably had found other means of acquiring food, so a full ration was no longer necessary.

With regard to refugee numbers, there is in Mr. Gettier's letter an error of fact. In Uvira, the only re-registration exercise of 1996, conducted in June-July, showed no significant reduction in the caseload figures. The assertion of a 32% reduction is entirely false. Although WFP during the early months of 1996 expressed discontent at HCR's delay in conducting census exercises, they did not directly relate the lack of verified figures to the March ration cuts. If numbers had been a primary factor, then WFP's acceptance of the figures from the reregistration exercise should have been followed by an immediate restoration of full rations. It was not until we presented the results of this study that WFP agreed to restore rations. Even then they refused full restoration of the maize ration because, they said, there was just too much maize in the market.

Concerning possible extortion of food by the Interahamwe and ex-FAR, we remind Mr. Gettier that the Uvira population was largely (>67%) Burundian, not Rwandan (nor genocidalists!), and, Burundians were not vulnerable to intimidation by these two bodies. We also looked for evidence of 'taxation' by any branch of refugee leadership, but found none, hence we had nothing to report. What was evident, both through direct observation, and discussions with refugee women and Zairian and refugee traders, was the widespread sale and exchange of small quantities of food aid as households attempted to balance their diets, to improve the taste of a bland monotonous diet, and to satisfy basic needs. Of most serious concern to us is the policy Mr. Gettier proposes for situations where terrorists are exacting food from refugees. He says that it is "quite correct to effectively limit the depredations of in-camp terrorists by reducing the amounts of excess food that ... genocidalists could tax and skim". Usually there is no 'excess food' in such situations, so this suggestion is no different from withholding 'food as a weapon' - a policy that has been denounced by the United Nations and its member states and numerous non-governmental agencies. There are more efficient and humane means of curtailing 'terrorist' activities than by denying sufficient and adequate food to a largely innocent population!

The basic conclusions of our study provided concrete evidence in support of the many written and spoken statements and policies, including those of the primary donor to the Great Lakes emergency, that acknowledge that sales of food aid can be a normal part of refugees' coping with their unfortunate situations. However, the response to the sales with a ration cut showed that these policies were not implemented.

Yours etc.

Barbara Reed and Jean-Pierre Habicht
November 12, 1998