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The politics of cotton

BY STEPHEN YAFA SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

As Alima Traore stoops under an equatorial sun to pick sticky-seeded fibers by hand from the bolls of a gangly plant in the cotton fields of Mali in West Africa, it's a safe bet that she isn't up to speed on the details of the proposed cuts to American agricultural subsidies in President George Bush's latest budget. Most probably she also hasn't yet heard that the WTO (World Trade Organization) upheld its earlier ruling that condemned excessive U.S. subsidies to its cotton growers. News travels slowly, mostly by word of mouth to her mudhut village near Fana, about one hundred miles southwest of the country's capital, Bamako. Villagers here have only the most primitive communication links to the outside world. There is no electricity. Mali is the fourth poorest country on earth.

Still, the raw cotton these family farmers cultivate behind oxen on about six acres per household and harvest only by hand competes directly with U.S. cotton, much of it planted and gathered on 10,000-acre farms with satellite-controlled equipment so sophisticated that a human simply sits in the tractor's cab and monitors an on-board computer screen while the vehicle steers itself and travels more than a mile in one direction without wandering more than a few inches off course. Three million tons of that cotton were dumped on the international market in 2004 at far below the cost of production. Massive taxpayer subsidies to the nation's largest cotton producers turn losses into profits and enable them to continue to grow and export vast quantities of cotton that depress world prices by an estimated 15 percent.

In Mali and its cotton-growing neighbors, Benin and Burkina Faso, those numbers translate to near-starvation for many of the area's 10 million people who rely on cotton for their livelihood. America's 25,000 growers received about \$2.7 billion in federal subsidies in 2004. Corporate farmers who make up the largest 10 percent in acreage collected close to 80 percent of that money—about \$512,000 per individual. Malian farmers make about \$1 a day in the best of times. When supply exceeds demand, as in a bumper crop year like 2004, they're doomed. With the West African franc pegged to the Euro, escalating costs for pesticides and primitive equipment—inputs—force them to go further into debt to produce cotton that fetches less than it costs to grow and harvest. Like Alima, more than 3.8 million Malians depend almost exclusively on this one cash crop, Mali's only sizeable export, to pay for everything from food to clothes to medicine to education. If Alima cannot contribute her share, \$2 a month, to pay for her village's hired teacher, her children are banned from the classroom. There are no subsidies in Mali.

None of that qualifies as late-breaking news. The same trade distortions created largely by extravagant U.S. cotton subsidies toppled the last 2003 WTO (World Trade Organization) meeting in Cancun, when Brazil led a walk-out of developing countries to protest the dumping of U.S. raw cotton, which accounts for 45 percent of the world's total export. The billions that taxpayers contribute through federal subsidies as welfare to the nation's largest cotton growers offer them no real incentive to plant less cotton or to diversify crops.

Researching a social history of cotton a little more than a year ago, I surveyed the grim situation in Mali and its cotton-dependent neighbors from a safe distance half a world away in Marin County, my home, where sunlight glints off the hoods of BMWs and cooling sea breezes drift through the windows of million-dollar houses. But when a series of unexpected events provided an opportunity to travel to Mali in person last fall as a member of an Oxfam delegation, I found myself standing next to Alima and others in her village's parched cotton field in a sub-Saharan country slowly being swallowed up by sand. Fine grains mingled in the air with ash from wood fires that burn everywhere, creating a permanent haze.

I went to Mali primarily to find out who was telling the truth, and who wasn't. American growers argue that poor farmers in West Africa and elsewhere do not suffer the effects of dumping because they're too removed from the flow of revenue. I'd brought up the issue with cotton producers in the Mississippi Delta and many other cotton states. To a grower they told me they were the victims of biased, inaccurate media coverage. Sure, they said, we may be selling cotton for less than it costs us to produce it in a down market. But that's only half the story. The other half is that those West African governments have a lock on the cotton industries in their countries, and when prices rise, who gets the money? The poor growers? Not on your life. They never see a penny. It all goes into the pockets of the officials in control. Oxfam, among many organizations, contends that the additional revenues filter down to the West African field workers. So do newspapers like the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, longtime opponents of fat farm payments to cotton growers.

In cotton country that doesn't fly. "Maybe the farmers in West Africa are the ones that shouldn't be growing cotton," Mississippi grower Ken Hood, former chairman of the National Cotton Council, told me. I heard the same sentiment expressed in almost precisely the same language half a dozen or so more times.

During a water break I asked Alima and her co-workers through an interpreter about the lot of family farmers in Mali. In Fana and elsewhere, she told me, growers are now becoming

stakeholders in the nation's cotton industry. In fact, the morning our delegation arrived, there was a formal ceremony in the mudhut village celebrating its cotton association's official recognition as a cooperative. That minor change in title held the promise of a significant elevation in power. Farmers at the lowest rung of the supply ladder are now helping to set the annual price they get for their crops, and to share more in profits. They view it as a major victory.

Tahirou Bamba, general secretary of the nation's cotton producer cooperative, told me there was one way for the United States to help Mali. "Stop your subsidies!" he said. "Avoid inequities!" he shouted with a curious combination of rage and resignation, as if trying to restrain himself from getting too worked up over a losing cause.

In sessions with the prime minister and President Amadou Toumani Touré, we heard the same argument. While our government has been pouring as much \$40 million into that country's economy in humanitarian aid to stave off impending starvation among Mali's 10 million people, federal subsidies have created a deficit higher than \$30 million—and that figure will surely rise after the glut of 2004, at least in part due to dumping. Adjusted for inflation, the world price for cotton is now as low as it's been since Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793.

All of which brings me back to President Bush and the Law of Unintended Consequences. Budgetary desperation can do wonders where compassion and common sense falter. Faced with staggering losses and willing to step boldly to staunch the bleeding, the Bush administration proposes to take on the mighty National Cotton Council lobby. It can only benefit in that cause from the WTO's latest ruling. If payment limits are enacted there would be billions less spent on subsidies to these agribusinesses in the next decade. Congress, feeling the pinch, may agree to bring cotton subsidies into line with the economic realities of our time. An unintended but real consequence of that wholesale money giveaway in the past has been to breed contempt for America in Islamic countries that view the United States as brutally insular and epically self-absorbed. Mali, an Islamic country with a democratically elected government, has long been considered a model for friendly relations in a hostile world. But even there, anti-American terrorists from Algeria to the north have made inroads and won recruits. Wherever the crop is grown in developing nations, our cotton policies have been a prime witness for the prosecution.

Now that may begin to change, even if slowly and subtly, and if none too soon. Why put so much effort, rhetoric and hard cash into making the world safe for democracy, by invitation or not, when our subsidies undercut the self-sufficiency of countries we're trying to win over and instead breed fear and loathing? If that makes no sense, consider that the lavish federal cotton subsidy program itself operates on a faulty, antiquated premise. The original notion was to pay farmers to grow a fiber that would then also benefit the nation's textile manufacturers who converted the cash crop into clothing and sheets that dressed America and tucked it in at night.

For more than a decade, those mills—Pillowtex, WestPort Stevens, Cone, among them—have been shutting their doors and laying off hundreds of thousands of workers. There is no more domestic cotton manufacture of any size in this country, which is why America's cotton growers now export the bulk of their cotton, and why subsidized cotton now mostly benefits the factories in Asia that put ours out of business.

There are other issues, too. At present, agricultural subsidies arbitrarily reward one crop and punish another like a bad parent attempting to dispense justice. Total reform isn't anywhere on the horizon, but one unintended consequence of the proposed cuts may be to enable Alima, among thousands of other West African farmers, to keep her children in school with the few additional dollars a month that her family earns. It's all but impossible to put a price tag on the goodwill that would engender, or the profound meaning it would have to destitute people who place all their hope in a better life for their offspring.

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