

Report on the food situation in Belgium (London, 3 April 1946)

Caption: On 3 April, at the conference on European Cereals Supplies in London, the representatives of the Belgian delegation paint a picture of the food situation in Belgium.

Source: Emergency Conference on European Cereals Supplies held in London from 3rd to 6th April 1946. London: 1946.

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Belgium

Statement by Mr. ARTHUR MAUTERS, Minister Plenipotentiary :

" We have been invited by the State Secretary to do practical work. Therefore, this will be strictly a technical statement.

This is the food situation in Belgium.

Before the war, Belgium used to import one-half of her calories. She imported one million tons of food for human consumption and two million tons of food for animal consumption. On page 3 of the White Paper entitled the ' World Food Situation,' which was distributed at the start of the Conference, the figure of 3.7 million tons of bread grains is quoted as the amount imported by continental Europe alone, before the war. Thus Belgium alone imported more than one-quarter of the bread grains required from overseas by continental Europe.

Why was the rate of wheat imported by Belgium so high ? Because Belgium is the most densely populated country in Europe and her economic structure is based on small holdings. There are only 464 farms of over 100 hectares. This may be a very unpleasant situation, but although Belgium yielded one of the largest production per hectare in the world, nothing could improve her food position and, even in years when the home crop reached an exceptionally high level, Belgium's import requirements still stood at one million tons of wheat per year. Already before the war, bread and potatoes were the main items of the Belgian daily ration. The pre-war ration was deficient in animal proteins, fats, calcium and certain vitamins. This deficiency was noticeable in our pre-war health statistics. Infant mortality was twice as high as in Holland. According to an inquiry that I made as Minister of Health, we discovered that 37 per cent, of the girls attending the Brussels schools were suffering from scoliosis and bone deformation ; 90 per cent, of the children had dental defects. Our pre-war ration was therefore physiologically out of balance. Five years of occupation have certainly not improved this situation, as is shown by the increase of T.B., rickets, anaemia and other diseases due to malnutrition, so that my country must solve a very serious problem of physical rehabilitation.

At present, in March 1946, the theoretical ration amounts to 1,860 calories – 55 percent of which are represented by bread alone—which means a decrease of 1,000 calories as compared with the normal figure.

Belgium took drastic measures to improve her home production although she had, like other occupied countries, to face serious problems such as disruption of transport, inundations, shortage of man-power, and the wear and tear of agricultural equipment.

She reduced animal food consumption to a minimum ; although the number of pigs and poultry have increased since the liberation, it has not reached yet, by far, the pre-war level. For poultry for instance, which were great cereal consumers, the number amounts to 30 per cent. of that of 1939. No foodstuffs are distributed to animals, not even to horses, with the exception of horses working down the coalpits. It is obvious that this exception needs no explanation in a country whose only raw material is coal. The home production of animal foodstuffs is far below normal and import of animal foodstuffs has dropped to roughly one-third.

I want to be very frank about the black market. The black market is the most ghastly evidence of food shortage. There is no black market in countries of plenty ; there is no black market for bread and potatoes, where those commodities are not rationed. The Belgian Government did not fail to take action against the black market, which was disappearing, when alarming reports about the world food crisis were circulated in the press. But those who are familiar with that very depressing feature of occupied or liberated countries, know very well that the black market is limited economically and socially. Fifteen per cent, of our population only are active in agriculture ; 60 per cent, of our population live in urban or industrial districts,

and knowing the prices ranging in the black market, we may well ask who can afford to rely on the black market to complete an already insufficient ration. Certainly not the people with limited income, who represent 95 per cent, of the population.

In spite of the fact that the home wheat production is exhausted and that the potato crop is far below normal level, Belgium decided, in the face of the world crisis, to cut down her bread ration from 450 grammes per day to 400 grammes which means a loss of 130 calories ; in addition we decided to fix the rate of extraction of 83 per cent, and to include 10 per cent, of rye in the bread. A further cut of the bread ration would reduce the general ration below the danger line.

The Belgian people, despite their limited rations, did everything in their power to help the Allied armies and their friendly neighbours ; and now again, Belgium is prepared to share the burden of other nations to solve the very serious crisis which is facing the world."

Statement by M. KRONACKER, Minister of Imports :

" I believe I can say that Belgium has played the game in the pooling of international resources.

During the war we put all we had at the disposal of the liberating armies. This was only quite natural. Since then we have been acting on the same lines .We. have been completely invaded twice in the last thirty years. This means that our population had to live during eight years under enemy occupation, or I should rather say enemy starvation. The repercussions of that situation on the people's health should be borne in mind. Through the generous help of our great allies and also through our own hard toil and unflinching will to recover, we have been able to get the country back on its feet.

We are now faced suddenly with a food crisis so grave that if no ways and means can be found to cope with it, our whole recovery will be jeopardised.

The facts are the following :

We have wheat supplies up to 15 May, maybe the 20th. After that we shall have no stocks left whatsoever. We have turned to every possible source of supply.

On the basis of the present ration in Belgium, our import requirements are about 80,000 tons a month. Therefore we need 360,000 tons up to 1 September with the provision of a thirty days' stock.

Now there are a few facts I want to stress :

(1) Our ration for April will be about 1,850 calories, out of which bread represents 55 per cent, and potatoes another 7 per cent. Due to crop failures we are very short of potatoes, too. As a matter of fact, we had to reduce the potato ration from 9 kilos per month to about 6 for April. Mr. Wauters told you that our rationing was short in calcium, in animal proteins and fats. I insist on the question of fats to which I will revert later. He also gave indications about the poor state of health of our children.

(2) We have been told, when we had an opportunity to discuss our case with our friends, ' your imports of cereals for the first nine months of the crop year are about 1,000,000 tons. This is the equivalent of your pre-war imports.' It is indeed as if one compares cats with dogs, and by that I mean if one compares our total cereal imports this year with our wheat imports before the war. If one looks at the picture as a whole, the figures are very different. Pre-war we imported over 3,000,000 tons of cereals and 1 ^{1/2} million tons were produced at home. We had therefore 4 million tons available for human and animal consumption. For the first nine months, our imports are, roughly speaking, 1,100,000 tons. Home production was about 900,000 giving a total availability of about 2,000,000 tons, which is less than 50 per cent, of pre-war requirements. Putting it in another way, we used to import over 3,000,000 tons of cereals and foodstuff and our imports up to now have only been 30 per cent, of it.

Pre-war production (White Paper) of bread grain in continental Europe, excluding the U.S.S.R., was 59,000,000 tons. Imports from the four overseas producers averaged 3.7 out of which Belgium imported 1,200,000, i.e. one-third. We are therefore one of the largest permanent wheat importers. In fair or bad weather we shall always have to rely on foreign imports, considering our highly industrialized economy.

Is it to be held against us that we did our best to improve our herds which were 50 per cent, below normal in weight and 25 per cent, below in numbers when the country was liberated, and we had little or no hope of getting any quantities of meat from outside sources ?

May I, Sir, draw your attention to the information contained 'in the White Paper circulated this morning pertaining to animal feeding of wheat in the four main exporting countries which jumped from 4 ^{1/2} million tons pre-war to 13 million tons in 1944-45 and 10 ^{1/2} millions tons in 1945-46.

We have always been strongly in favor of international solidarity. We have helped our friends and neighbors when we could. We lent them wheat when they were in a difficult position and our stocks allowed us to do so. We are making a not unimportant contribution in the fertilizer field, although it is needed at home. We are delivering fair quantities to our friends and allies, and even to the occupation zones. We shall be unable to carry on if we have to reduce our rations again under the subsistence level.

(3) There is also our contribution in the field of oils and fats. Wheat is not under allocation, but decisions are put before us and our delegates are not invited to be present when our own case is discussed. This may sound queer when one bears in mind that we are one of the largest permanent clients of the exporting countries, as I have pointed out a moment ago.

Oils and fats are under allocation, and we are full members of the Committee. We therefore take our part in every decision.

What has been our attitude at this Committee ? The Belgian Congo has an exportable surplus of 115,000 tons, of which we bring about 70,000 in the pool, keeping for ourselves only 44,000. It is true to say that in return we get about 33,000 (50 per cent.) of liquid oils and lard which the Congo does not produce. This we do although our ration in fats and oils at home is only 1 kilo per head per month and may have to be reduced for April.

We acted in the same way with regard to rubber and tin when none was available in Belgium. Although coffee—our national beverage—is still strictly rationed at home, we go on delivering about 50 per cent, of the Congo coffee to our African neighbors.

Now as I said at the beginning, we are in favor of pooling resources in a case of emergency, but we feel that the pooling should work all the way round. Can it really be expected from us that we should have _to go with practically no wheat supplies up to the end of the crop year when in so many countries which have not been invaded, including neutrals, wheat and potatoes are not on the ration list ?

Therefore, Sir, I venture to ask two things :

(1) That our position in wheat be studied and due consideration given to our contribution to the general welfare in other fields to the detriment of our own population.

(2) That in the future our delegates whom, as I said, represent a large permanent customer for the wheat exporting countries, be called to meetings of the Executive Committee of the Combined Food Board when our own position is discussed and that we be informed of the decisions taken regarding our country."