

PROSPECTS FOR OLIVE HARVEST DISCUSSED

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[Article by Monika Warich]

[Text]

AMMAN — This year's olive harvest, which is expected to be completed by mid-December, will be a good one, but the final yields are not likely to be available before January 1987, according to Director of Highland Development Project Ahmad Rimawi. The first rains, which came particularly early in October this year, did the olives a world of good, he added. Before, they had been poorly developed with a low oil content, as could be expected after the previous very dry seasons. But another more important reason for a good harvest is the fact that olive trees naturally produce high yields only every second year. This rhythm is more obvious in Jordan, where in addition to a harsh climate, fertilising and irrigation practices are not always perfect and damaging harvesting methods — such as hitting the trees' outer branches with sticks — are still in use, Mr. Rimawi added.

The second, heavy rains at the beginning of November are not likely to have affected this year's harvest as much, but coming harvests will benefit from the greatly increased soil moisture. The whole harvest in most parts of Jordan has been delayed by about a week by the second rains, he said, but no damage to speak of has been done to olive farmers.

Favourite fruit tree

In the Jordanian highlands, particularly the Western parts, more olive trees spring from the ground every year. Presently, they seem to be the farmers' favourite fruit tree crop.

There are two major projects in Jordan which, among other things, promote and support the establishment of orchards, the Highland Development Project and the Zarqa River Basin Project, being carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture in cooperation with foreign assistance. Both projects operate in the main olive growing areas of Jordan between Amman and Irbid and on the slopes down to the Jordan Valley.

Mr. Rimawi explained that Jordanian farmers prefer olives to other crops for several reasons. First, olives are very well-adapted to the dry and hot climate. It is possible to grow them in areas with as little as 250 mm of annual rainfall, he said, although below 300 mm of rainfall they drastically reduce their growth rate and give unsatisfactory yields. The second reason is that the growing of olives is relatively easy and does not require any specialist skills, an important factor for many Jordanian farmers who frequently come from a non-farming, often

bedouin background. Olives in Jordan also have a very good market and marketing facilities through government-run wholesale markets in Amman, Salt, Irbid, Jerash and Mafraq, while the very early olives are being sold along the roadsides. Last year, one kilogramme of raw olives fetched 400 fils (JD 0.400), and prices are fairly stable from year to year, Mr. Rimawi added.

Help with the harvest

But the rush to the olive is not entirely without difficulties, as an emergency programme recently initiated by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) to help farmers with the olive harvest, indicates. According to RSCN Director Maher Abu Ja'fr, the expenditure for harvesting the olives amount to as much as 50 per cent of the total production costs and therefore, the RSCN agreed with the Ministry of Education to rally pupils from secondary schools to help farmers harvest the olives on a voluntary basis. Presently, labourers around the towns (Amman, Salt, Jerash) are available at rates of JD 3.000 to JD 3.500 per day for the harvest, while farmers in remote areas have to cover the cost for the transport for their labourers. Otherwise, if they cannot fall back

on their family for the harvest, they have to employ contractors. There is also very little scope for mechanisation in olive harvesting apart from the use of so-called tree shakers.

Marketing

According to an expert working with the Zarqa River Basin Project, the high production costs of olives and olive oil in Jordan make it very unlikely that they will be able to compete on the international market in the foreseeable future. Locally produced olive oil is presently sold at JD 2.000 per kg, which is more than double the price of imported olive oil, such as that, from Tunisia. This high price is maintained by import restrictions. As the international market for olives and olive oil is also saturated — olive oil is already one of the European Community's excess products — Jordan's expensive oil does not stand a great chance of entering the EC market.

At the moment, there is no real problem for the farmer to sell his olives on the local market, and quite a large amount of the oil and pickled olives are still distributed within families, following a deeply rooted belief that one's own olive oil is always the best. But in the coming five to ten years, olive

gluts in Jordan could occur, when all the trees that have been planted during the last five years start to yield. In fact, advisers for the Zarqa River Project are now advising farmers not to plant any more olives but to diversify their orchards with other fruit trees such as apricots, pears, figs etc.

Concerning their olives, farmers should concentrate on improving their stock by means of regular pruning, fertilising and irrigating the trees if necessary. These measures could increase the oil content of the olives to nearly 30 per cent, while with the local varieties — mainly Nabaleh from Palestine — contents vary from 15 to 20 per cent.

Olive trees start yielding in their fifth to seventh year, their productivity rises up to the 35th year to remain constant for the following 80 to 120 years, then declining slowly.

All over Jordan, the Nabaleh variety is liked best by the farmers, Mr. Rimawi said. Trials conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture to introduce Italian species were a complete failure as these more Mediterranean varieties needed too much humidity. Improved varieties of Nabaleh and other local sorts were no success either as their fruits and oil did not suit the farmers' taste and the traditional olive varieties continue to be grown all over Jordan as well as the West Bank.