

Romanians revert to rations to stop hoarding

BUCHAREST, Romania - Already meager meat supplies have become critical and some communities have imposed short-term rationing to fight hoarding by consumers long denied the bare necessities, a top food official said Wednesday.

Romanian Radio and government officials announced, meanwhile, that trials would begin next week for six top henchmen of ousted Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, including the No. 3 man in his government. Officials say the trials will be public and nationally televised.

Food shortages were widespread

in the last years of Ceausescu's 24-year tenure because of a forced export drive aimed at paying off Romania's multibillion-dollar foreign debt.

Before Ceausescu's downfall Dec. 22, each Romanian was restricted to 1.1 pounds of meat a week, and sugar, oil, eggs and butter also were either rationed or unavailable.

In the provinces, rationing was even stricter. In Sibiu, 125 miles northwest of Bucharest, people made do with 2.2 pounds of meat every three months, less than one stick of butter a month and half a loaf of bread daily.

Although food supplies have improved some since the revolution, Vintila Rotaru, minister in charge of the domestic food industry, was pessimistic when asked about the supply of meat.

"I am confronted with a very bad situation," he told The Associated Press. "We are speaking of a critical shortage."

Ion Radulescu, manager of Bucharest's main distribution center for relief supplies donated from abroad, described meat, along with dairy products, as the most vital food aid.

One test of the provisional government's credibility is its ability to ensure adequate food supplies to Romania's 23 million citizens, and both Rotaru and Radulescu expressed concern about the short term. Rotaru said he hoped food imports - now a trickle - would increase enough by April to banish the threat of shortages.

The daily Romania Libera said Wednesday several thousand people had protested in Brasov, about 100 miles north of the capital, Jan. 13-14 "about the aggravation of food distribution . . . and the re-introduction of ration cards for food," and spoke of

the re-introduction of rationing in other communities in a separate article.

Rotaru acknowledged some local rationing but described it as a short-term measure introduced to stop panic buying by consumers used to years of deprivation and skeptical of whether the improvement in supplies was permanent.

"They started hoarding meat, salami, all that they found, fearing the past," Rotaru said.

Butchers and shop clerks polled at random in Bucharest stores said widespread hoarding continued.

Soviets respond to ethnic violence

MOSCOW - The Kremlin on Wednesday told the thousands of soldiers it sent to the Caucasus to shoot if need be to halt bands of Azerbaijanis and Armenians fighting each other in hills around the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Thousands of Armenian refugees poured from the southern republic of Azerbaijan, many beaten or chased from their homes by angry mobs. Some blamed the attacks on Azerbaijanis who earlier fled ethnic violence in Armenia.

The death toll rose to 58, mostly Armenians, and the number of injured to 169 in five days of civil

warfare, an Interior Ministry official said.

The evening TV news show "Vremya" ran a statement from the KGB and the interior and defense ministries, which control troops in the area, that said:

"Risking their lives, they have so far refrained from using arms against criminals to prevent bloodshed.

"However, a sharp increase in outrageous attacks has made the situation unbearable," and the soldiers now were permitted to use their weapons in accordance with military rules and Soviet law.

Four burned bodies were found in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, the

official news agency Tass said Wednesday.

Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said Wednesday that Islamic fervor was behind events in Soviet Azerbaijan, and warned Moscow not to deal harshly with the Shiite Moslem upsurge, Tehran radio reported.

The broadcast, monitored in Cyprus, quoted Khamenei as saying "anyone who thinks or pretends that the motives behind these movements are ethnic or nationalistic is making a big mistake. These sentiments are Islamic, and Soviet leaders should face this fact with realism."

Research questions ability of oat bran to decrease blood cholesterol levels

BOSTON - Contrary to cereal ads and popular belief, oat bran does not lower cholesterol levels, according to a study that challenges one of the biggest food crazes of the 1980s.

The new research concluded that people who eat lots of oat bran do indeed have less cholesterol in their blood, not because of any special powers of oat bran but because they eat less saturated fat and cholesterol.

"There really isn't any cholesterol-lowering property in oat bran," said Dr. Frank M. Sacks, a co-author of the study. "Oat bran pretty much does the same as other cereal products."

Oat bran has been promoted as a health food largely because it is rich in soluble fiber. Several studies have suggested that this kind of fiber somehow removes cholesterol from the body.

But this latest study concluded that people's cholesterol levels dropped just as much when they ate food made with low-fiber white flour and Cream of Wheat as it did with heavy intake of oat bran, because fat consumption went down.

The researchers said the lower fat and cholesterol consumption, not high fiber intake, entirely explained the drop in cholesterol seen in their study.

The study, conducted on 20 volunteers, most of them hospital dietitians, was directed by dietitian Janis F. Swain at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. It was published in today's New England Journal of Medicine.

The volunteers ate seemingly identical muffins, meat loaf and casseroles for two, six-week periods. During one period, the food contained 100 grams, or 3 1/2 ounces, of oat bran per day, while during the other, it contained that much white flour or Cream of Wheat as a control.

On both the oat and non-oat regimens, their cholesterol levels were about 7 percent lower than before they went on the diets. Before the diets, they were eating 12 percent of their daily calories in the form of saturated fat. This fell to 10 percent while on the high-fiber diet and 9 percent on the low-fiber diet. Consumption of cholesterol dropped by

one-third.

Using dietitians as test subjects meant the researchers had a healthy group who already largely followed recommended diets. Their cholesterol levels averaged 186.

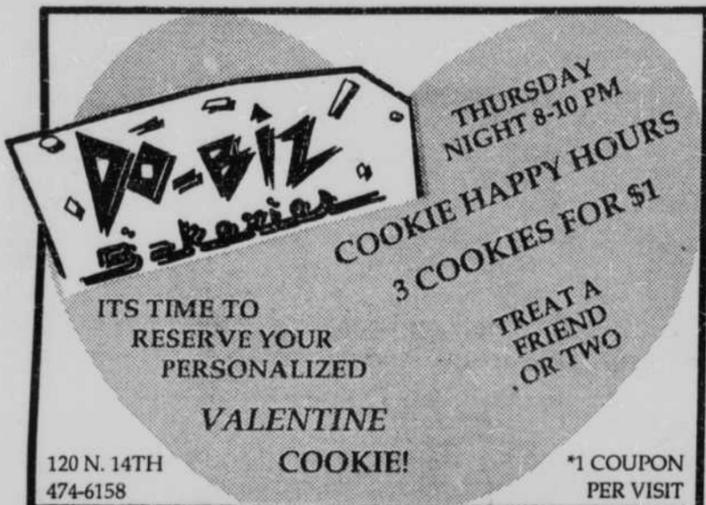
Among the reports most widely cited in favor of oat bran was a study conducted by dietitian Linda Van Horn at Chicago's Northwestern University. It found that substituting oat bran for other carbohydrates in the diet lowered blood cholesterol levels by 3 percent.

Her study attempted to keep fat consumption constant, and she said the latest work does not shake her conviction that oat bran and other forms of soluble fiber can lower cholesterol.

"With their small sample size and without the dietary control necessary to monitor the situation, I don't know what this means," she said.

At Quaker Oats Co., which stresses oat bran's benefits in its cereal ads, research scientist Fred Shinnick said the group studied was too small and healthy to show a pronounced effect of oat bran.

"There is a clear cholesterol-lowering effect when you use oatmeal or oat bran," he said. "We don't think one small study disproves the weight of the evidence that has been published over the past 25 years."



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The Daily Nebraskan (USPS 144-080) is published by the UNL Publications Board, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE, Monday through Friday during the academic year; weekly during summer sessions.

Readers are encouraged to submit story ideas and comments to the Daily Nebraskan by phoning 472-1763 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The public also has access to the Publications Board. For information, contact Pam Hein, 472-2588. Subscription price is \$45 for one year.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Daily Nebraskan, Nebraska Union 34, 1400 R St., Lincoln, NE 68588-0448. Second-class postage paid at Lincoln, NE.
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