

Growing famine in Central America

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A famine is afflicting 1.4 million Central Americans, including in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. The immediate cause of the famine is a devastating drought that severely reduced the corn crop. In Nicaragua at least six children have died. In that country, the famine is being compounded by the layoff of thousands of coffee workers.

The so-called hot zone of the drought includes southern Honduras, southern Guatemala, western El Salvador and northern Nicaragua. International agencies report that 791,000 people are facing extreme loss of food in Honduras, 100,000 in El Salvador, 105,000 in Nicaragua, and 12,000 families in Guatemala.

In Nicaragua, another 8,000 Miskito Indians are also facing famine as a result of floods and thousands of families in the coffee growing regions of Jinotega and Matagalpa have been left jobless and homeless from the bankruptcy of coffee farms in the region.

In Matagalpa, Nicaragua thousands of desperate rural workers wander the highways of this prosperous coffee region seeking work and relief. The bankruptcy of many farms in the region has left 70,000 workers in misery.

The coffee growers evicted the coffee workers because bankruptcies in the banking sector have made it impossible for them to secure loans for their crops under conditions of a sharp drop in international coffee prices. Typically, rural workers live on the farm where they work. Therefore, in addition to being sacked, their families have been made homeless.

Many of the coffee refugees are enduring Nicaraguan weather conditions by covering themselves with makeshift plastic tents. Aid is being delivered erratically. At Los Monos Park in Matagalpa, food aid for 61 families attracted 600 other needy townspeople. "We have nothing," said one of the new arrivals. "We are hungry, our children are hungry and we have no

jobs, like them [the coffee workers]."

There have been marches and rallies in the major cities in the region. Two thousand workers abandoned their occupation of the Los Monos Park when the government promised roadwork jobs at 31 cordobas (two US dollars) per day. Even that paltry promise turned out to be false, since there were only jobs for 450 people.

Coffee workers average only a dollar a day in piecework rates when they have work, about the same as the average price of a cup of coffee in most major cities of the world.

During the first week of August, thousands of rural workers and peasants mobilized in San Nicolas, Department of Esteli, near the Honduran border, demanding food. Many held their malnourished children in their arms. In 32 Esteli towns, more than 6,000 are suffering hunger as a result of the destruction of their crops. The mayor of San Nicolas denounced the administration of Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman for minimizing the crisis. "We lost 100 percent of our crop," he said. "When the Agriculture Ministry reports that only 50 percent of the crop was lost, this does not conform to reality."

Last May 12, communities in the vicinity of President Aleman's mansion, 11 miles south of Managua, were declared in a "state of hunger due to a lack of food, jobs, clean water, health, education and sewers." Needless to say, none of these problems were afflicting the president's residence. In addition to electricity, clean water and air conditioning, the mansion has a helicopter pad making it possible for visitors to fly in and out and avoid the surrounding misery.

Aleman has refused to declare an emergency, commenting at a press conference, "There is no famine simply because nationwide there have been no increases in the price of beans, corn or rice. It [the famine] is a product of the imagination."

While food remains plentiful for urban Nicaraguans (the nation will undoubtedly export foodstuffs this year), hundreds of thousands of poor Nicaraguans are unable to buy food. Miami's *Nuevo Herald* reports that many are unable to pay 20 cents a pound for corn, or 25 cents for beans, and are instead being forced to buy rice hulls, left over from the processing of rice and normally not eaten by humans, for 14 cents a pound. In the absence of corn, many are going into the jungle to eat wild bananas and mangos, foods that induce diarrhea in the young.

Even before this crisis, hunger in Nicaragua has been an everyday reality. A report from the Institute of Nicaraguan Studies indicates that 45.2 percent of Nicaraguans do not have the US\$72 dollars needed every month to buy a basic basket of 23 food and household items, and 24 percent could not afford to buy half a basket.

The institute also reports that 52.7 percent of the population do not have steady employment and 15 percent are unemployed. Under these conditions, even a minor drought can escalate into a social catastrophe. Already malnourished, the starving population is prey to infectious disease epidemics that can continue killing after food supplies are "normalized."

While the Aleman government acknowledges six dead from hunger, it insists there is no crisis. At a meeting of Central American agriculture officials on August 10, Nicaragua's agriculture minister explained the government's refusal to declare an emergency, claiming the damage is "localized." He accused unidentified political opponents of "trying to manipulate and politicize" events.



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