

Central American famine worsens

Gerardo Nebbia**5 September 2001**

The UN's World Food Program (WFP) reports that as many as 1.6 million Central Americans are suffering from famine as a result of a drought in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The agency has said up to now it has only been able to distribute food to about half of the nearly 700,000 people in urgent need of food supplies.

The WFP says it can only feed 405,000 victims of the famine. "Right now we can only assist a little over half of the vulnerable population most affected by this food crisis," explained Francisco Roque Castro, WFP Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean. "Our hands are tied because we do not have the resources required to help the rest of the vulnerable population urgently in need of assistance."

One Guatemalan clinic in the town of Camotan, 300 kilometers from Guatemala City, reported last week that already 41 people have starved to death, including 13 children and 22 elderly people. The clinic reported that so far this year it has treated 1,232 people suffering from severe malnutrition. Last week Camotan's municipal government declared the city in a "state of calamity."

Guatemalan newspapers indicate that the situation is not limited to Camotan, and have published heart-wrenching photographs of children in the final stages of starvation.

Salvadoran health authorities report that 30,000 children are currently suffering from malnutrition, 30 percent of the estimated 100,000 people affected by the famine in that nation. Children under five are in the most danger. Their parents also suffer hunger and are thus unable to work, prolonging a vicious cycle of desperation.

The Salvadoran government appropriated \$27 million last week for emergency employment plans. It reports that its food reserves were exhausted by earthquakes last January and February, and is appealing for

international aid.

The Honduran-Nicaraguan border was already suffering from high rates of poverty and unemployment before the drought. As a result of a drop in coffee prices, Honduran plantations stopped the seasonal hiring of Nicaraguan migrant workers. Furthermore, 18 maquiladora factories closed this year, laying off 13,000 workers.

In Honduras the per capita income is \$691 per year. In normal years, 60 percent of the population report having some trouble feeding their families. This year Honduras has been the country hardest hit by the drought. Perhaps as many as 700,000 of its peasants are suffering some form of malnutrition.

Since only the worst affected areas are receiving food aid, many families have taken to the forests in search of mangos and other tropical fruits and armadillos. "They have no more corn; they have run out of sorghum.... I don't know how they are surviving," reported Brian Husen, a 26-year-old Peace Corps volunteer in the Honduran town of Reitoca.

The peasants of this entire Central American region depend on methods of cultivation that have varied little since colonial days. They are forced to labor on relatively infertile and steep fields, at the mercy of the weather. Most of the villages in these highlands have no electricity to power pumps. Only the most primitive irrigation methods are used.

In Nicaragua, where the per capita income is only \$451 a year, 175,000 people are affected by the drought. Another 100,000 have been expelled from the coffee farms in the Matagalpa region. Exacerbating the situation is the refusal of the administration of Arnoldo Aleman to recognize that there is a food emergency in the country.

Nicaragua is in the midst of a financial crisis of catastrophic proportions. The bankruptcy of two major banks has left the country with virtually no

international reserves or credit to provide to the private sector. The drop in world coffee prices, from \$84 a ton last year to \$51 this year, bankrupted many of the plantations.

An AP reporter gave an account of the expulsion of coffee pickers from a farm in Los Milagros, Nicaragua. Hard hit by an oversupply of coffee and a consequent drop in world prices, in August 2000 the Los Milagros plantation stopped paying daily wages of \$1.48 for men, \$1.11 for women and 55 cents for children.

The plantation management said they had run out of money and offered the pickers a daily meal of rice and beans. Many of the affected coffee workers, who had been on that land for three generations, had no place to go. "We would eat a little and feed our children with what was left," said 28-year-old Justo Cesar Mendoza.

In November, the company defaulted on its mortgage. Its 200 hectares were taken over by the Nicaraguan Bank of Finance in the middle of the coffee harvest. To minimize its loss, the bank determined that it would reduce its costs to 42 cents per pound of coffee. This required the sacking of all but 15 pickers, and 408 coffee workers were expelled from the land. To make sure that the workers left, management destroyed any food that they had left and chopped down the banana trees that pickers used to supplement their food.

This scene, repeated in many of the other coffee plantations, resulted in a human wave of hungry refugees camping out in Matagalpa, begging and foraging in the city dump for food. "It is not an easy thing to grab your sick children and take them away," said 35-year-old Jose Angel Perez, "but when the children start to stick to us saying 'papi, I want to eat,' one had to do something."

The plantation owners, the banks and Nicaraguan President Aleman deny that any of this took place. Aleman alleges that the political opposition is manipulating the coffee workers. However, along the nation's roads hundreds of families, homeless and hungry have set up improvised shelters with black plastic coverings.

In the wake of demonstrations by hungry peasants and coffee workers, Aleman finally responded, offering to transport people back to their homes and to provide them with jobs building roads and bridges. Yet very few jobs have been created.

Even if Aleman intended to make good on his

promise, the Nicaraguan state is on the verge of bankruptcy. Its international reserves are at an all-time low and the country is unable to service its \$3 billion debt. The bankruptcy of the two leading banks has further undermine the country's financial structure.

For that reason, the government entered an agreement with the International Monetary Fund that imposes drastic austerity measures that preclude a serious program of jobs, housing and food for Nicaragua's unemployed, homeless and hungry population.

The agreement, signed on August 28, well after the famine and coffee crisis began, commits the Nicaraguan regime to a \$150 million reduction in public spending and to the privatization of its telephone and energy sectors.

Hundreds of hungry Nicaraguan peasants are crossing the border into Costa Rica every day in search of food and jobs.

The famine is the latest catastrophe to befall the impoverished region, which has long been a source of vast profits for US corporations. Agribusinesses such as Cincinnati-based Chiquita Bananas (formerly known as the United Fruit Company) monopolize the most fertile land, while poor peasants are forced to cultivate and build their homes in areas subject to mudslides and flooding. Central America also bears the scars of decades of US military interventions, including the proxy war fought by the US-backed contras against the radical nationalist regime in Nicaragua during the 1980s, as well as Washington's support for bloody dictatorships in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala during the same period.

As in previous disasters, such as Hurricane Mitch—which struck the isthmus in 1998, killing over 10,000 people and wiping out many of the banana plantations—the US is providing only token aid in the current famine.



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