

Famine devastates states of northern Mexico

Rafael Azul**24 January 2012**

Malnutrition and famine are killing peasants in northern Mexico. The destruction of their crops by drought, coupled with rising food prices, have made access to the most basic foods impossible for many peasant families—already chronically underfed. In 2011 over one million hectares of food crops were lost, together with 42,000 head of cattle.

Mexican peasants from the northern States of Chihuahua, Zacatecas and Durango launched a “Caravan Against Hunger” to demand relief from famine in those states that have been affected by drought, freezing cold weather and famine. The marchers are protesting President Calderón’s veto of climate change legislation. The measure, vetoed on December 22, included a 10,000 million peso subsidy to the agricultural regions most affected by drought and climate change. The Caravan reached Mexico City on January 22 and set up camp at the Agriculture Ministry.

The government insists that there are enough resources to deal with the drought in Chihuahua and elsewhere. So far officials have been indifferent to the food crisis. For example, ten days ago, on January 13, Economics Minister Bruno Ferrari denied that there was food crisis in Mexico. Ferrari also refused to consider a price cap over the exploding food inflation, on the grounds that it was difficult to determine what the “just price” should be.

While the situation is most dire in the impoverished areas of the north, and among indigenous populations, even relatively rich states are reporting increasing malnutrition. In the industrial state of Nuevo León some two million people are chronically hungry. In all twenty states that have been affected by environmental catastrophe—drought in the north and flooding in the south—poor workers and peasants are facing a nutritional catastrophe.

None of this has to do with the lack of food, but the lack of money to buy it. Mexican Senator Alberto

Cárdenas, president of the Senate’s agriculture commission, recently noted that Mexico is one of the world’s leading exporters of basic foods. In 2011, he said, the value of Mexican food exports exceeded US \$21 billion. “It is absurd to predict that Mexico is a failed state due to lack of food,” declared Cárdenas, adding, “we predict that food productivity will continue to rise; Mexico will continue to produce more food with less water, using more advanced technologies.”

Transnational agricultural companies such as Archer Daniels Midland, Nestlé and Bunge Ltd. have invested heavily in Mexican agriculture and export ethanol and other products. Overall international capital flows into Mexican agriculture have grown more than seven-fold since the turn of the century.

Large corporate farms with modern agricultural machinery, more efficient technology, fertilizers, enhanced pesticides, animal feed, and packaging equipment drive out small farmers, many of whom crowd the cities and emigrate north. The globalization of Mexican agriculture has gone hand in hand with the impoverishment of Mexican rural population.

These agricultural monopolies dictate the policies of the Calderón government and use the Agriculture ministry to represent their corporate interests. Some companies, such as Monsanto and Cargill, have benefited from millions of pesos of tax exemptions.

Cargill, known as the “corn coyote,” established a virtual monopoly over the marketing of Mexican corn. Consequently, the price of corn tortillas, a staple in the Mexican diet, is now hostage to the speculators in the world’s commodity markets. Despite an alleged agreement with Cargill to cap the price of tortillas at 8 pesos per kilo, in a single day, December 13, 2011, tortilla prices rose from 8 to 12 pesos in Mexico City and to 13 to 15 pesos elsewhere.

Another Mexican staple, beans, have lately been unavailable at any price in many parts of Mexico.

Consumers are being urged to buy lentils instead. The 2011 price of beans doubled, from 10-12 pesos to the current 22 pesos a kilogram.

Taken as a whole, prices for a basic food basket, including beans, tortillas, vegetable oil, some meat and dairy, rose 45 percent in 2011. Since October 2011 to the present, prices exploded by 35 percent, leaving the poorest Mexicans with no alternative but to go without.

In the northern state of Chihuahua, the Tarahumara Indians, unable to pay for the high price of corn beans and squash, on which they have traditionally depended, are the first to confront outright starvation.

Last week the Mexican Red Cross, regional government agencies, and the general public mobilized to send emergency supplies to the impoverished Tarahumara communities, following reports that six Indians had starved to death and 50 members of the tribe, unable to feed their families, had jumped off a cliff in desperation.

“The Indian women get sad after four or five days when they can’t feed their children,” declared a spokesperson on the video. “They are so despairing that up through December, 50 men and women went to the mountain valleys ... and threw themselves into valleys. Others hung themselves.”

The video report posted on social media sites circulated last weekend. In response to the news, people throughout Mexico gave donations of food and clothing for the famine victims. Chihuahua state officials, who up to now had ignored the humanitarian crisis, denied the suicide reports, which they blamed on “unscrupulous outsiders.”

In fact, the 200,000 Tarahumara who inhabit 23 municipalities in the Copper Canyon region of Chihuahua are among the most exploited peasant populations in México.

According to the agricultural organization *El Barzón*, Tarahumara Indians die of malnutrition every year and are largely ignored. This year, the drought, the worst in 70 years, and the publicity through social networks have drawn the attention of the Mexican public.



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