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Suffering in Central American Drought

by LADB Staff

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About 8.6 million people living in rural areas in the Pacific Coast regions of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and in west-central Honduras, are suffering from hunger and malnutrition as a result of recent droughts, according to a report released in San Jose, Costa Rica, last week. The UN World Food Program (WFP) report called the strip a "drought corridor." The number of people affected represents about one quarter of Central America's 35 million inhabitants. Of those affected, 2.6 million live in Nicaragua, 2.5 million in Guatemala, 2.2 million in Honduras, and 1.2 million in El Salvador.

Dry conditions that destroyed crops during the last year, together with the effects of other natural disasters, have left them, said the report, "without anything to plant, nothing to eat, and nothing to sell." Those other disasters include Hurricane Mitch in 1998, widespread unemployment from the collapse of international coffee prices, and earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. "This is converting Central America into a region more and more vulnerable...70% of the families living in the drought corridor are peasant farmers without land," said Zoraida Mesa, director of the WFP in Latin America and the Caribbean.

For Honduras alone, the WFP called for more international aid to continue help to some 100,000 people affected by drought there. WFP representative for Honduras Claudia von Roehl said that WFP food supplies on hand now would only last another two months. "We appeal to the international community to send their donations to the WFP for this drought, whose effects have impacted the food security of thousands of small farmers," said von Roehl. The food would go to people in seven departments of the country: Intibuca, Lempira, La Paz, Francisco Morazan, El Paraiso, Choluteca, and Comayuga. So far this year, the organization has distributed 932 tons of food to the 35 affected municipalities through civil and governmental institutions. Von Roehl said that children are those worst affected in Honduras, as, according to the report, they are elsewhere in the corridor.

Young children especially vulnerable

Children less than five years old are the sector of this population of greatest concern to the WFP because they are most susceptible to chronic malnutrition, and several have died this year of hunger. Adding to the problem, 70% of the communities in the drought corridor have no health centers, 20% have no wells, either public or private, and many others lack sufficient water from any source or basic services of any kind (see NotiCen, 2001-09-20). This miasma has hovered over the region for a decade, serving up disasters on an intermittent schedule so diabolically timed that populations are unable to recover from the last one before the next one hits. When a crop fails, the people have neither the strength nor the means to plant another. Most live on less than a dollar a day. Many drought victims never recovered from the 1998 hurricane.

Currently, WFP provides food for only about 1.5 million of these people, mostly at schools, preschools, and health centers. The report, based on a survey taken throughout the affected region, found that throughout the drought corridor, households face a period of severe food insecurity during the first planting and harvest season, May through August, and another during the second harvest season, September to November. The quantities of food are so drastically reduced that in some areas families rely on gathering wild food. Scarce vegetation, limited crop diversification, and subsistence farming characterize the areas. The locally recurring droughts are closely related to global climatic variations, including El Nino (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23).

Most of the families, 70%, live on rented land for which they pay in cash or crops. More than 84% did not finish grammar school and 37% of adults are illiterate. About 46% of the communities do not have a teacher; there is no nurse or doctor available for 84%. These areas are also used for coffee production, which accounts for the widespread unemployment in the area. Each of these facts contributes to a lack of alternatives. This report verifies a warning contained in a special alert issued a year ago by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The FAO Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture warned in September 2001 "...if the drought continues...there is a serious concern about the food security early next year of those farmers who had gathered a poor harvest of first season crops." The Alert explained that the first-season crop harvested in August should provide small family farms with food until the end of the year, when the second crop is due to be harvested. But the ability of the farmers to recover from the effects of the drought by increasing the area planted in the second and third planting is limited by the lack of seeds. The current report bears out that the FAO prognostication has come to pass.

Families cope with this serial disaster in mostly negative ways for lack of viable alternatives. Most often they rely on the sale of assets like small animals, short-term migration to find work, and changes in diet. This last includes reducing the number of food products and reducing the number of meals. About 80% of those surveyed depend on very few food items with low nutritional value corn, sorghum, beans, and salt. In normal times the majority, about 83%, eat three meals a day. Half of these reduce meals to two, and almost 20% eat one meal a day in difficult times. Among the more severe negative coping strategies is family dissolution.

In an exemplary case, one householder simply shut up the house and disappeared, presumably heading for the Mexican border and leaving a destitute family behind. It remains to be seen whether von Roehl's plea for additional donations to Honduras will be heeded there or anywhere in the region. But the global picture suggests that it will not.

On the other side of the world, in North Korea, the WFP has begun cutting its aid because of a shortfall in donations. There, WFP country director Rick Corsino said, "We've been operating there for six or seven years, since 1995, and this is the very first time that we've actually had to make serious cutbacks in our distribution plans, mainly the ones aimed at the feeding of the most vulnerable core beneficiaries, and these are of course the youngest children, and pregnant and nursing women."

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