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## **Malnutrition In Guatemala: Death And Permanent Debilitating Damage To The Nation's Children**

by LADB Staff

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It has taken a while for official Guatemala to catch up with a July 18 report in the British medical journal *Lancet* documenting that malnutrition in the country is at the crisis point. The study, funded by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, says most children in Guatemala get enough to eat but the food is nutritionally inferior, leading to chronic malnutrition for many. Author Samuel Loewenberg worked in a Chiquimula clinic where he saw wasted, severely malnourished children, many with kwashiorkor, a protein-deficiency disease with a long list of debilitating symptoms. Untreated sufferers are permanently stunted in height and weight and have diminished mental capacity. The outlook for these children is further clouded by economics. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) chief in Guatemala explained, "The chronic malnutrition could at any moment turn acute with the current economic crisis." The study reports that half the children in the country are in this condition, and the rate rises to 90% in some areas. The highest numbers track those where the civil war raged most fiercely, like the northern highlands of Quiche. The rates of stunting surpass those in failed states like Haiti; nearly half Guatemala's kids under the age of five are stunted. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) pegs the situation as the sixth-worst in the world and says stunting is twice that of Haiti, where per capita income is only 25% that of Guatemala. Loewenberg commented in his report on the ongoing nature of the crisis. "Malnutrition does not get any headlines unless there is the picture, the money shot," the report said. He was talking about the ubiquitous photo of a child with distended belly, too lethargic to brush the flies from its eyes. Economics dictate that the poorest are the hardest hit, of course, not only because of the downturn but also because a shortage of beans and eggs, the sole source of protein in areas where the environment has been hunted clean of meat animals, and deficient infrastructure adds to the problems. Bean harvests have been poor in these areas, and a lack of feed has resulted in fewer eggs. Many residents are having to sell whatever eggs they have to sustain their families. Without clean water, for instance, diarrhea is a major contributor. In Quiche, 80% of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day. Chronic malnutrition might be a misnomer. For many, the issue is intrauterine malnutrition. Hungry mothers produce already malnourished babies. This produces a perceptual problem wherein so many people are in this condition that they do not even notice they are stunted; practically everyone they see is stunted. A paradoxical effect sometimes occurs when children appear almost obese from water retention, the result of failing internal organs, enlarged livers, and weakened kidneys. Normally black hair turns blond from vitamin deficiency. Later it falls out. Skin sloughs, and so on. It's the government International agencies fault the government's paltry efforts to fix the problem. They remind that Guatemala is not a poor country, it is just that income distribution also ranks among the world's worst, and the rich are insulated from the plight of the poor by a deep class divide and do not pay their share of taxes because the government does not press them. President Alvaro Colom denies there is lack of food for his populations. "In Guatemala there is no lack of food, the supermarkets are full. What exists is a lack of resources in poor families to be able to buy food." He argues inequality and a prolonged drought in the so-called dry corridor is at the root. But now that the problem has his attention, he said he would meet with

his Cabinet to assess whether a state of emergency is needed. He acknowledged that, during the last decade, malnutrition has doubled and that "nothing was done to combat hunger." The UN has dispatched a special relator on the right to food. The official, Olivier de Schutter, is scheduled to arrive in September for a three-day visit. He will write a report to be presented to the Human Rights Council in 2010. In the meantime, assistant to the president on food security Ana de Mendez told the media the government needs US\$50 million in emergency funds to deal with the crisis. She said the government has already spent US\$7.5 million to combat hunger in the dry corridor, where corn and bean plantings have been lost. She said an allotment of basic foods has been delivered to each needy family since August, and a second allotment is scheduled for distribution Sept. 7. At least 20 children are known to have died from starvation in the region. Ignoring the length of time this has been going on, de Mendez blamed the current economic situation. "This situation impedes us from covering these needs, because we don't have resources," she said. "Nevertheless, the necessary efforts are being made to contain the crisis and avoid more children falling into malnutrition."

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