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## **Guatemala: Administration Of President Alvaro Colom Under Fire Regarding Food-security Crisis**

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One of flagship social programs of the administration of President Alvaro Colom, the conditioned cash-transfer scheme Mi Familia Progresiva (see NotiCen, 2008-07-24), has come under fire in recent days as more than 300 cases of severe malnutrition have been reported in the drought-stricken eastern departments of Guatemala known as the Corredor Seco (see NotiCen, 2009-09-03). Colom came to power in January 2007 claiming to be "the government of the poor" and promising to tackle rural poverty through programs such as Mi Familia Progresiva, which gives low-income families US \$18.50 a month, as long as the children attend school, and an additional US\$18.50 for them to receive regular medical checkups. It is managed by the Consejo de Cohesion Social, a government body integrated by ministries, secretariats, and funds dealing with social development set up under the Colom administration and managed by first lady Sandra de Colom. Although similar programs implemented in Brazil and Mexico have had positive results, Mi Familia Progresiva has been hugely controversial because it has been funded with much-needed resources diverted from the Ministries of Health and Education. There have also been allegations that the program is being used as a canvassing tool by the governing Unidad Nacional de Esperanza (UNE) party and in particular by Sandra de Colom, the most likely UNE candidate for the 2012 presidential elections, and that implementation of the program has lacked transparency. Assessment finds program lacks adequate controls An assessment of Mi Familia Progresiva published in September by Accion Ciudadana, the Guatemalan chapter of Transparency International, points to the lack of control mechanisms to verify that beneficiaries are indeed enrolling their children in school and taking them to regular medical checkups as the program's main weakness. When ghastly images of severely malnourished children hit the headlines, the Colom administration's critics seized this as proof that Mi Familia Progresiva was not working. The government's attempts to underestimate the scale of the problem fueled accusations of a cover-up, especially after Carlos Rodriguez, former head of the pediatrics section of Hospital Nacional Nicolasa Cruz, in Jalapa, one of the Corredor Seco departments, was transferred to Coban on Aug. 26 after making public the increase in malnutrition cases and the hospital's lack of resources to deal with the problem. "They can force me to shut up but they can't hide an obvious reality like malnutrition," he told the Guatemalan press after finding out about the transfer. However, experts point out that attributing Guatemala's food-security crisis to failings in implementing Mi Familia Progresiva alone is to underestimate the structural causes of the problem, such as poverty, an export-oriented economic model that has sacrificed the production of basic grains for the domestic market, and the gradual destruction of the government's agrarian institutions. "This tragic crisis clearly shows that more than good will alone is required to change things. It is crucially important to have strong institutions to provide support, a solid organizational support, an adequate budget, and a qualified and highly motivated staff. Time is also needed to allow these processes to mature. Until the present crisis broke out, the government's social programs derived their political legitimacy from the widespread support they had among the population. This crisis does not cast doubt on these programs but it does raise questions about their design and sustainability," says political analyst Edgar Gutierrez. Food insecurity caused by

poverty, land-use issues Experts agree that the number-one cause of food insecurity in Guatemala is poverty. Almost 51% of the population lives below the poverty line with 15.2% living in extreme poverty, and, as a result, 16% of the population suffers from malnutrition, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Secondly, Guatemala has lost its food sovereignty after decades of export-oriented economic policies that led to the growth of commercial crops such as African palm, which have gradually displaced production of basic grains for local consumption. According to the latest Encuesta Nacional Agropecuaria, carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) between 2007 and 2008, land used for profitable export crops such as coffee, sugarcane, cardamom, bananas, and African palm increased at the expense of dietary staples such as corn and beans, which have shrunk by 40%, creating the need to import basic grains. This has been compounded by the virtual privatization of the country's agrarian institutions. Edin Barrientos, former minister of agriculture under the administration of President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), points out that the gradual destruction of Guatemala's Sector Publico Agrícola, set up as part of Gen. Carlos Arana's agrarian-development plan, began under the administration of President Alvaro Arzu (1996-2000), when the Ministry of Agriculture was steered toward overseeing export-oriented production, and production for the domestic market was delegated to myriad social funds, which tended to disappear or were relabeled from one administration to the next. The way in which grain-storage facilities have been neglected and allowed to fall into disrepair is a clear example of this. "We've been unable to go beyond handouts for the rural population. What we need to do is strengthen public institutions through the construction of storage facilities," says researcher Susana Gauster of the Coordinación de ONGs y Cooperativas (CONGCOOP). CONGCOOP estimates that the Ministry of Agriculture would need to invest US\$180,000 in refurbishing 11 grain stores of the Instituto Nacional de Comercialización Agrícola (INDECA) that have fallen into disuse and US\$6.1 million in constructing 27 new stores to boost basic-grain production and maintain reserves for the dry season. Minister of Agriculture Mario Aldana admits that basic-grain storage must be improved but says that the ministry's budget can only be stretched so far. "The solution is not to strengthen the state but to build public-private partnerships," he says.

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