Region: Central American Droughts Threaten Food Security

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Large swaths of Central America are suffering an El Nino-fueled drought that has exacerbated the challenges facing impoverished rural populations in some of the poorest countries in the Americas. Guatemala has been by far the hardest hit, with hundreds of thousands of people struggling to meet nourishment needs and the reported deaths of 25 children from malnutrition in 2009. In Honduras, authorities have recently expanded their drought-forecast map to include the southern half of the country and increased the estimated number of families expected to face food hardship, while a worsening drought in Nicaragua has sparked heated political debate regarding its impact. El Nino, a warming of Pacific Ocean surface temperatures in the central and eastern tropics that disrupts global weather patterns, has significantly reduced rainfall in parts of Central America. Though the phenomenon is expected to dissipate by midyear, authorities fear a late onset of rains in the drought-affected areas, raising fears that food shortages will continue affecting the neediest people in countries already wracked by violence, political turmoil, and the global economic crisis.

Worse to come

Before the latest drought, Guatemala was already one of the worst countries in the world for chronic malnutrition in children (NotiCen, September 03, 2009). The UN says that 43% of children under five years of age suffer from the irreversible development-stunting condition. It is the worst figure in Latin America and the fourth-worst in the world. Guatemala’s "dry corridor", the southeastern corner of the country bordered by the Pacific, El Salvador, and Honduras is no stranger to drought. But 2009's rain deficit might have been the worst in a generation. In some corridor areas, crops failed completely, and production was greatly reduced throughout. The resulting food shortages likely exacerbated Guatemala's chronic malnutrition rate in children, which had been slowly improving – the figure was 49% early in the last decade – and created a spike in acute-malnourishment cases. "In terms of a situation of famine with direct effect on the rights of children, above all their right to nutrition, this is the worse we have confronted," said Amilcar Ordonez, director of Guatemala's office of Save the Children, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that has worked in Guatemala since 1976. Save the Children's Guatemala program normally focuses on child-development issues in impoverished indigenous areas but last year took on direct responsibility for 1,300 cases of acute malnutrition, said Ordonez. "We hadn't been through a situation like this," said Ordonez. "Normally we don't attend to those cases, the state system has the capacity to attend to them. But in that moment [the government] was totally overwhelmed."

NGOs and the UN in October and November last year surveyed the dry corridor and found alarming statistics. Eleven percent of children and 13% of women were suffering from acute malnutrition this, at a time when bean and corn harvests would typically have nutritional needs close to being met. About 34% of families 137,000 in total suffered from food insecurity, which indicated they were not eating three meals a day and were trending toward cheaper, less nutritious food. More than three-quarters of families did not have food reserves in their home. Karina Schmitt, the program officer for the Guatemala office of the UN's World Food Program (WFP), said that data
has not been gathered since then but that the number facing food insecurity could have increased this year. Aid agencies do not expect the situation to improve until harvests, rain permitting, begin in late summer. "This is a slow onset of an emergency," said Schmitt. "The peak period is still to come."

Exacerbating the drought was the global recession (NotiCen, October 30, 2008), which reduced remittances – a large source of income for poor Guatemalans – and hurt the country's economy through drops in exports, foreign investment, tourism revenue, credit access, and greater unemployment, said Schmitt. "This combination of factors was pushing the working poor into the ranks of the hungry poor." The recession and the Haiti and Chile earthquakes has also hindered the WFP's drive for funds to confront the crisis. In early March, the UN, in conjunction with the Guatemalan government and aid partners, asked for US$34 million for the crisis. By month's end, only 15% of the funds had been collected. "This needs to be seen in the context that we just passed a global financial crisis, so governments have tightened their belts a little bit more than usual," said Schmitt. "And we also recently had two dramatic earthquakes...in Haiti and in Chile where a lot of funds went. So we have [to] also, in a way...compete with other emergencies in the region."

Guatemala, a country of 14 million people and extreme inequality, is often criticized as a near-failed state where drug cartels and violence are exacerbating the effectiveness of already weak institutions. Despite the government's struggles with the drought crisis, aid groups have seen positive moves under President Alvaro Colom. The WFP's Schmitt said the Guatemalan government launched a system to better detect acute malnutrition, reducing death risk. Save the Children's Ordonez said the Colom government launched social programs before the crisis that pointed toward increased government attention to the country's neediest. "In this sense, the political situation has helped alleviate a bit," said Ordonez, adding that under previous administrations, the neediest in a similar crisis "would have been totally unattended to, and it would have been worse."

Concerns in Honduras, Nicaragua

The Central American drought outside of Guatemala has not reached similar extremes, but officials and aid workers in Nicaragua and Honduras are warning that reduced rainfall has hurt farm production and is threatening food security. In Honduras, authorities increased a drought warning to 10 departments the southern half of the country from an original estimate of three. The Comision Permanente de Contingencias (COPECO), the Honduran government's emergency-response agency, in March estimated that 150,000 families had drought-diminished food production last year, up from 25,000 people in February. "This phenomenon is one of the strongest in the last 25 years," COPECO said in a statement titled Food Security at Risk. Added to the global economic crisis and the drought, Honduras also had to contend with 2009's coup (NotiCen, July 09, 2009), which adversely affected the economy. COPECO expected the dry season to extend to June and noted authorities would have to "attend to some 50,000 families who are in the greatest risk of food security and avoid the extreme of famine."

Nicaragua's northern agricultural region has seen tens of thousands of farmers lose crops to drought, reported the Nica Times newspaper in February in an article that chronicled government denial that media claims of food shortages could lead to famine. Some 300,000 people who depend on subsistence farming were affected by the drought, the newspaper reported. The UN's Food
and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported in February that crop losses in 23 municipalities in
Nicaragua's dry corridor topped 50%. Some 90% of families surveyed in these municipalities did not
have basic-grain reserves. "If the impact of the drought worsens, it will have strong repercussions
in the food and nutritional security of the rural families that are found in the range of poverty
and extreme poverty who reside in the zones of the country's dry corridor, especially the most
vulnerable groups like boys and girls under five years of age," the FAO report said.

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