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A severe drought, the worst to hit Nicaragua in more than three decades, has ruined crops, killed thousands of livestock, and burdened already struggling families with crushing price hikes on beans, corn, and other crucial food staples.

The phenomenon is impacting other countries as well, particularly within an area known as the dry corridor, which begins in southern Guatemala and extends south through Honduras, El Salvador, and into Nicaragua (NotiCen, April 8, 2010, and Jan. 20, 2011). The corridor covers roughly one-third of Central America and is home to some 10 million people. The drought is threatening the food security of approximately one-quarter of that population, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP).

"The dry corridor is an area very vulnerable to climate change and is home to mainly subsistence farmers who largely depend on corn and bean crops and temporary labor in the coffee sector," Miguel Barreto, the WFP’s regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean, explained in a recent interview with Reuters.

Unlike Guatemala and Honduras, Nicaragua has opted against declaring a state of emergency. Authorities did, however, submit a request in early August for direct food aid from the WFP. The government, led by President Daniel Ortega, identified 66 municipalities that have been particularly hard hit by the drought and estimates the number of Nicaraguan families in need of assistance at 100,000.

The WFP responded almost immediately, distributing emergency supplies to more than 85,000 families. Each of the UN agency’s food packets contains 15 kg of rice, 15 kg of corn, 10 kg of beans, 5 kg of Supercereal (fortified cereal with micronutrients), 3 liters of oil, and 1 kg of salt. The WFP plans to continue supplying needy families into early 2015. The Japanese government has lent a hand as well. In early September, via the WFP, it donated more than US$500,000 worth of rice (491 tons), most of which will be distributed through a Nicaraguan school-meals program.

The Ortega administration has also taken measures to contain soaring food prices. In July, it authorized tariff-free imports of red beans from Ethiopia (20,000 tons) and white corn from Mexico (73,000 tons). A month later it green-lighted the tariff-free import of nearly 100,000 tons of rice. Prices, nevertheless, remain high. As of Sept. 9, red beans, for example, were selling at approximately US$2.20 per kg, up from US$0.80 per kg in September 2013, the daily La Prensa reported.

Assessing the damage
The Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua (UPANIC), a leading growers' association, claims that speculation, rather than production losses resulting from the drought, is to blame for the high prices. Farmers lost approximately 20,000 of the 280,000 hectares of red beans they had
hoped to collect during the year’s first harvest—carried about between May and August—and yet production still exceeded the country’s estimated consumption needs, the association reported in mid-August. Peanut, corn, and rice harvests were down as well, by 2%, 11%, and 22%, respectively.

"In this country we don’t have a social crisis," UPANIC head Michael Healy told El Diario Nuevo last month. "What we do have in this country is a drought affecting the dry corridor, which is made up of fewer than 100 municipalities. However, in most of those places it’s raining and production is taking place."

Residents in the affected communities tell a different story. Luis Leiva, a campesino interviewed this past July by the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, lost his entire 3 ha plot of corn and squash to the drought. The tenant farmer would normally have sold those crops at the Mercado Oriental in Managua, the Nicaragua capital, to support his family and collect the money he needs to continue renting the land on which he plants. "The last three rains have been miserable, not enough to really even wet the earth," he said. "It’s all lost and now I just have to see if I can plant in late August or September."

The drought has delivered a huge blow to cattle farmers as well. The Comisión Nacional Ganadera de Nicaragua (CONAGAN), a livestock-producers’ association, reported in July that the drought had already killed 2,500 head of cattle. Many more are at risk of starvation, Sergio Argüello, a CONAGAN official, told reporters in early August. "More than 600,000 cattle are affected, a certain number of them have already died, while the others have nothing to eat," he said.

Nicaragua has an estimated 4.1 million head of cattle. In 2013, beef was the country’s second-leading export product (US$389 million) after gold (US$436 million), according to the Centro de Trámites de las Exportaciones (CETREX) [NotiCen, March 13, 2014].

Costly ‘coffee rust’

Complicating matters even more for Nicaragua—particularly in rural communities—are ongoing problems with its third-leading export product: coffee (US$349 million). Production has been hampered in recent years by an orange-colored fungus (Hemileia vastatrix) known as roya, or coffee-leaf rust, which is affecting coffee plantations throughout Central America. Together, the region’s producers are expected to lose some US$500 million this year, the International Coffee Organization (ICO) estimates. The blight is also costing thousands of campesino pickers a vital albeit meager source of income.

This past March, reporter Alex Renton of The Observer, a British newspaper, visited the Nicaraguan department of Jinotega where he spoke with small-scale coffee planter Candida Rosa Piñeda. At harvest time, her rust-infected plants yielded just five sacks of coffee rather than the habitual 60, she said. As a result, Piñeda didn’t hire any outside help this year; family members did all the picking.

Renton also interviewed a pair of campesino pickers, Rosibel and Benjamín Fijardo, who couldn’t find any regular work for this year’s harvest and were forced instead to scavenge for stray beans that had fallen and gone overlooked by previous pickers. "This is how we will feed our family for the next two months. By pecking like chickens!" Benjamín, 34, told the reporter.

For idle pickers and others suffering the consequences of the coffee fungus, the drought—particularly given its impact on food prices—has added insult to injury. "The situation facing Central America’s dry corridor is very serious indeed. A prolonged drought affected this year’s first
harvest and a crisis from last year in the coffee sector caused by roya across Central America meant fewer seasonal coffee pickers were hired," said the WFP’s Barreto. "The situation can get worse. If the drought continues we may face a humanitarian crisis at the end of the year."

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