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El Niño Adds Food Shortage to Ongoing Political Crisis in Haiti

by George Rodríguez
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In its habitual crisis scenario, Haiti is facing the imminent prospect of a massive shortage of food, its worst in 15 years, which could add to the ongoing political chaos caused by a repeatedly postponed runoff to the October presidential vote.

The outlook for the impoverished majority of the people of this French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean nation is bad. Almost 80% of Haiti’s 10.6 million nationals live in poverty, and just around 70% in extreme poverty, miraculously surviving on less than US$2 a day. In rural Haiti, where a little over half of Haitians live, poverty is almost 90% and extreme poverty reaches around 70%.

According to a recent warning by the World Food Program (WFP), the United Nations’ specialized anti-hunger agency, the grim outlook derives from the global El Niño weather phenomenon, which has intensified the three-year drought that has severely hit Haitian farmers, who are about to lose their fourth consecutive harvest. Estimates released by the WFP on Feb. 9 indicate that up to 70% of the crops were lost last year.

The warning and the figures were included in the Emergency Food Security Assessment (EFSA) the WFP conducted along with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the government’s Coordination Nationale de la Sécurité Alimentaire (National Food Security Coordination Unit, CNSA).

According to the EFSA, approximately 3.6 million Haitians are already facing food insecurity, almost half of them described in the study as “severely food insecure”—the latter implying the threat of suffering malnutrition.

“This is really a severe food crisis,” warned Wendy Bigham, WFP Deputy Director for Haiti, who added that the country is seeing the malnutrition rates dramatically increase, having doubled in six months. “Without rain for the 2016 spring season, farmers will lose their fourth consecutive harvest on which they normally depend to feed their families,” Bigham predicted on Feb. 9. “We need to help them meet their immediate needs and help build up their resilience.”

Assistance to families

According to WFP figures, since November, the UN’s specialized agency has been distributing food to some 120,000 Haitians in the areas worst hit by the drought. The food aid consists a two-month ration, including rice, oil, sugar, salt, and other items, for a five-member family, it added in a recent press release.

As a component of its urgent action in the country, the WFP also supports a program of school meals for 500,000 children, simultaneously ensuring they receive at least one meal per day and encouraging kids to attend schools, it also reported.
“WFP’s assistance to families is essential until at least the next harvest, expected in July 2016,” the agency said, adding that “to meet basic needs of 1 million Haitians, WFP, which is funded entirely by voluntary contributions, requires US$84 million.”

Haitian experts quoted on Feb. 9 by the US daily The Miami Herald also forecast a worsening scenario for the impoverished country’s vast majority. According to CNSA interim head Abnel Desarmours, Haiti is “in a situation that’s extremely difficult, and if it’s not addressed, it risks degenerating further in the coming months.” He also attributed the critical situation in part to the prolonged drought that has affected the country since 2014 and was accentuated in 2015 because of El Niño. Desarmours pointed out that in both those years agriculture production “diminished considerably.”

The country’s precarious finances, including a negative exchange rate, have combined with the drought to worsen the situation, according to economist Kesner Pharel. “In 2015, the average price in the economy, particularly the food price, reached the highest level since 2008, when there was an international food crisis,” he said.

The gourde has depreciated
He also mentioned the constant depreciation of the gourde—Haiti’s currency—regarding the US dollar, having fallen from a 43-to-US$1 exchange rate before the 2010 earthquake to the present 61.25 to $US1. He said this creates inflationary pressures, and pointed out that inflation in December was 12%, which resulted in hikes in food prices.

Jessica Pearl, country director for the humanitarian US-based aid group Mercy Corps, was quoted by the US daily Los Angeles Times on Feb. 11 as saying that Haiti’s problems “require a strong political will and coordination between government agencies,” and adding that “it’s hard to have a response when you don’t have a functioning government.”

She was referring to the ongoing political crisis in Haiti. Elections were held in August last year for a new parliament and for a replacement for the much-criticized former president, Michel “Sweet Mickey” Martelly. The process marked by violence, irregular procedures, and ballot-stuffing, led to three postponements of the presidential runoff, and to an interim government, headed by Jocelerme Privert, who is running the country until a new president is elected (NotiCen, Jan. 14, 2016, and March 3, 2016).

The political stalemate led the UN Security Council last month to call on Haitian authorities to resume as fast as possible the pending presidential election process and hold the runoff vote. According to an agreement reached Feb. 5 by Haitian political leaders, Privert is to serve for 120 days. The presidential second round is now scheduled for April 24.

Sandra Honoré, the United Nations special representative to Haiti and the head of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for Stabilization in Haiti, MINUSTAH), told a three-hour council hearing on the country’s situation held March 17 that “Haiti needs political stability and stable institutions to provide the framework to address the many diverse socio-economic challenges the Haitian people face... Haiti needs stable institutions and a capable governance system.”
She said there was no alternative to the return to the path of institutional and political stability through the completion of the pending elections. But she warned, “Tensions continue to run high, with a political class yet to unite behind a common vision for the political process.”

**Core Group concern**

A statement then signed by Honoré and ambassadors of the nations and organizations seeking a solution to the Haitian crisis—Brazil, Canada, France, Spain, the United States, the European Union and the Organization of American States, collectively known as the Core Group—highlighted the group’s concern for the situation.

“The Core Group calls on all actors to spare no effort to ensure the implementation of the agreement, in the interest of the Haitian people and their right to choose their leaders and representatives through elections,” the text reads.

But the new election date seems, yet again, unlikely to be met. According to the Haiti Elections Blog, “there is a near-consensus in Haiti that the political accord’s April 24 date for elections is now unrealistic.” Rosny Desroches, a member of the Observatoire Citoyen pour l’Institutionnalisation de la Démocratie (Citizens’ Observatory for the Institutionalization of Democracy, OCID) and head of the Initiative de la Société Civile (ISC), told the blog that “there isn’t any possibility of those electoral races happening on the date set out in the Feb. 5 accord.”

Desroches’ skepticism is shared by political leaders such as André Michel and Moïse Jean-Charles, who have even said the accord must be renegotiated.

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