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Drought, Hunger Affect Millions in Brazil; Widespread Looting Reported

by LADB Staff

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Widespread hunger in Brazil's impoverished northeast has resulted in food riots and political problems for President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The Cardoso administration has been accused of using relief funds to pay the debt. The drought is seriously affecting 10 million people, most of whom live in dire poverty and are unable to obtain basic food supplies (see NotiSur, 04/24/98). The affected area represents 18% of the country and encompasses nine states: Maranhao, Piaui, Ceara, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraiba, Pernambuco, Alagoas, Sergipe and Bahia.

An article in *Veja* magazine said 150,000 people in Paraiba are only eating one meal a day, and in Piaui, 124,000 campesinos must depend entirely on food donations. Television news each day shows images of hungry elderly people and children pleading for food, and angry looters blaming the government for not providing assistance.

Many affected by the drought are leaving their land in search of a better place, often heading for the large cities. Church leaders say looting justified Cardoso, hoping for re-election in October, has been under pressure from churches, agrarian-reform activists, and his own political advisers to speed relief to the states affected.

As food riots broke out in several cities in recent weeks, the Movimento dos Sem Terra (MST) and the labor organization Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT) stepped in and organized further demonstrations demanding action by the government. "We are going to make sure that no one starves to death because of the drought," said MST leader Jaime Amarin. "The people are going hungry, and we cannot wait any longer for the government to come and distribute food. We are going to mobilize workers and organize sit-ins in city offices."

Minister of Justice Ranan Calheiros ordered the intervention of the Federal Police to stop the looting, which he blamed on the MST. However, defense of the looting was broad-based. The president of the Association of Judges for Democracy, Paulo Dirceu Agiar Dias Cintra Junior, said the lootings demonstrate a conflict between the right to life and the right to property, in this case food. "It is only logical that the right to life supersedes the right to property," he said.

Supreme Court Justice Jose Paulo Sepulveda Pertence said the looting was the result of extreme deprivation, and therefore "not a crime." The Catholic Church also said looting to stave off hunger is "neither a crime nor a sin," and accused the government of lacking the political will to respond to the problem.

The National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) recently published two documents criticizing government policies. "Brazilian society is increasingly more unequal and unjust," one document

read. "Chronically unjust wages are accompanied by a frightening level of unemployment and threats to the hard-won gains of workers." In the other document, the bishops call on the government and business leaders to carry out "concrete projects, which are permanent, to gradually help the country overcome the effects of the drought." The church pledged to organize efforts in 8,000 parishes to help those afflicted. In addition, the umbrella organization Citizens Action Against Hunger and Misery and for Life, which includes nongovernmental national and international groups, is also organizing relief.

President Cardoso calls riots political

President Cardoso lashed out at "inciters" of looting and threatened legal action against members of the clergy, union leaders, and the MST who have defended the raids on grain and food stores. Cardoso said MST leaders were using starving people to promote their own political agenda. "It is immoral," Cardoso told reporters. "They are using poverty and hunger to disorganize what needs to be done to resolve the situation."

On May 11, the administration asked the Justice Department to file charges against nine MST leaders and two union organizers for inciting looting. Relief may be too little too late. Meanwhile, in early May, Cardoso denied accusations that he failed to react promptly to the drought and pledged emergency food supplies to more than 1,200 towns. "We cannot accept that a single family, a single person, goes hungry in our country," said Cardoso. "We are going to resolve the problem of hunger, taking every measure to get food to the table of those who really need it...supervising the process to avoid fraud, robbery, and favoritism."

On May 8, two Hercules C-130 aircraft began flights from Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo airlifting 30 metric tons of publicly donated food to the states of Paraiba and Bahia. The Civil Defense department was coordinating the relief effort. The president also announced credit for farmers in the drought-stricken area. "We are putting 450 million reais (US\$395 million) at the disposal of rural producers in the northeast who are suffering from the drought," Cardoso said in a weekly radio address. He said half the loans would go to small farmers, who would only have to pay back 50% of what they borrowed.

Drought has political cost

The debate about the government's response to drought victims is quickly turning into an election issue. While Cardoso toured Ceara state on May 5, his main rival in October's presidential race, Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva, was nearby talking with campesinos and inspecting dried-up fields. Perhaps more damaging to Cardoso than accusations that the government response was slow and inadequate is the charge that the government ignored warnings about the severity of the yearly dry spell and used money set aside for the drought to pay the public debt.

Paulo Augusto Escada, spokesperson for the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (INPE), said INPE technicians had warned the presidency last December that this year's drought would be one of the worst in history. "Our technicians were in the Palacio de Planalto [presidential palace] last Dec. 17 to give a presentation on the seriousness of the drought and since then warned the government that the lack of moisture would destroy the crops in the northeast," said Escada. Members of the budget committee of the Camara de Diputados complained that the resources approved for drought

relief were instead used to pay the public debt. Committee members Sergio Miranda and Humberto Costa said last year Congress approved US\$40 million for projects to respond to the drought.

Nevertheless, they said, a review of records of the Sistema Integrado de Administracion Presupuestaria (SIAF) showed the money was used to pay financial obligations of the government. [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/03/98; Associated Press, 05/05/98; Notimex, 05/03/98, 05/05/98, 05/08/98; Inter Press Service, 05/08/98, 05/11/98; Clarin (Argentina), 05/11/98; Reuters, 05/05/98, 05/07/98, 05/08/98, 05/12/98; Spanish news service EFE, 05/06/98, 05/07/98, 05/10-12/98]

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