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Before the end of the year, the 200,000 Uruguayans who lived below the poverty line when President Tabare Vazquez took office will benefit from a new plan that aims to meet their most urgent needs. The Plan de Asistencia Nacional a la Emergencia Social (PANES) will receive US$200 million in funding over two years, in setting up projects to fulfill Vazquez's electoral promise to attend to the country's poor.

Social programs overhauled

The number of Uruguayans living in poverty currently stands at 1 million citizens, but the PANES will focus on the 45,000 families that live in extreme poverty those unable to adequately cover a daily food basket who will receive a "citizen's income," a monthly allowance of 1,360 Uruguayan pesos (roughly US$57). "The PANES is a temporary proposal, principally aimed toward the areas of food, health, housing, work, identity, and education.

Furthermore, it has six other programs bound to guarantee coverage of the basic necessities of the most vulnerable groups," explained Bertha Sanseverino, national coordinator of the program. The survey of potential beneficiaries, which began April 1, has three phases: the survey of homes, the on-site verification of the survey data, and the definitive incorporation of each candidate into the Ministry of Social Development database. Initially it was hoped that all beneficiaries would be registered in six months, but this has not been the case.

Avalanche of applications

When the process began, PANES received a barrage of applicants. "More than 100,000 poor Uruguayans registered, who, unfortunately, did not qualify for the citizen's income because, while they are poor, they are above the extreme-poverty line", said Sanseverino. The avalanche of program applications along with the lack of sufficient personnel to work on the survey caused a delay in its execution.

In July, the first phase of the PANES had reached less than half the total of its "protagonists," as Minister of Social Development Marina Arismendi calls the beneficiaries. This brought severe self-criticism within the government. "It is reasonable and necessary that each person assumes his or her responsibilities", admitted Arismendi. As expected, the unfulfilled goals generated unrest within the sectors where the PANES would offer help.
"It's logical that the people demand much more from a progressive government than from one from the right", said Jorge Zabalza, former leader of the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T).

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