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Rate of Extreme Poverty Increased Significantly in Mexico Since 1994

by LADB Staff

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A report published in early July by the Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL) said almost 26.3 million Mexicans live in conditions of extreme poverty, an increase of more than 9 million persons from the number reported in 1994. In 1994, SEDESOL reported that 17 million Mexicans were suffering from extreme poverty. SEDESOL released the latest statistics at a forum sponsored by the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). In addition to those living in extreme poverty, SEDESOL said another 14 million Mexicans are considered moderately poor, meaning that 40 million Mexicans suffer from poverty. The study said that among indigenous communities, 11 million persons suffer from extreme poverty.

The SEDESOL report was released only days after the Secretaria de Salud (SSA) published preliminary results from its Encuesta Nacional de Nutricion, which showed high malnutrition among children in rural areas. The data indicated that 45% of children in rural areas under the age of five suffer from severe malnutrition. The increase in malnutrition was reflected in an increase in infant mortality in some states like Guerrero, the study said. The SSA statistics showed the highest malnutrition rates in the central and southern states of Guerrero, Yucatan, Puebla, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Hidalgo, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Guanajuato, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz.

Legislators blame administration's policies for recent trend The SEDESOL report provoked intense debate in the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The two chambers are not in session, but several committees are holding meetings during the summer months. At a session of the joint Comision Permanente, members of the opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), and Partido del Trabajo (PT) criticized President Ernesto Zedillo for adopting economic policies that have worsened poverty-related problems in Mexico.

The legislators acknowledged that the surge in extreme poverty was in large part the result of the 1994 peso devaluation and the ensuing economic crisis. At the same time, they questioned the neoliberal economic model, which they said was largely responsible for the economic crisis. Furthermore, they questioned Zedillo's response to the crisis. "The government's resources went primarily to save wealthy persons and companies and neglected the needs of the poor," said PRD Deputy Manuel Alonso Raya. Raya and PAN Deputy Marco Antonio Adame urged the administration to change the government's approach to fighting poverty, which consists of patronage programs. These programs, they said, are intended to promote the election of candidates of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

In particular, the legislators pointed to programs like the Programa de Educacion, Salud y Alimentacion (PROGRESA), initiated by the Zedillo administration in August 1997 (see SourceMex, 08/13/97). "We have to stop merely talking about poverty," said Adame. "We must demand that the administration implement specific and concrete proposals to reduce poverty." PRI members of

the Comision Permanente also expressed concern about the surge in poverty. "The latest poverty statistics are scary," said PRI Sen. Jose Luis Medina Aguiar. Medina and other legislators questioned the government's long-term approach to fighting poverty. However, Medina also defended the Zedillo administration's actions to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis. "These actions allowed our country to restore economic stability."

As a follow-up to the session of the Comision Permanente, four other legislative committees of the Chamber of Deputies summoned Social Development Secretary Esteban Moctezuma Barragan to explain the latest poverty data and to spell out SEDESOL's plan for the remainder of Zedillo's term, which concludes in 2000. Moctezuma acknowledged that the neoliberal economic policies adopted by the administration were "inadequate" for a country like Mexico. However, he stopped short of rejecting the policies outright. "Our country requires a broad and efficient market economy, but also more specific policies to promote social justice," Moctezuma told legislators.

Moctezuma said the government faces the challenge of improving the standard of living in southern and central states, which are lagging far behind the industrial north. "We have an unequal society, which has brought great progress to 56 million Mexicans in northern states," said Moctezuma. "But we must also realize that 40 million other Mexicans, primarily in southern states, are living in poverty."

Some legislators scolded Moctezuma and the Zedillo administration for defending neoliberalism and failing to design specific actions to combat poverty in the next several months. "The marketplace by itself cannot generate equal opportunities and regional equity," said PRD Deputy Demetrio Sodi de la Tijera. Sodi accused Moctezuma of using the testimony before the four committees to advance his candidacy for the PRI presidential nomination in 2000. "We asked him to provide us information about the government's social program, but instead he told us about exports, the global economy, and the transition to democracy," said Sodi. "If we wanted information on those topics, we would have summoned the finance or the trade secretary." (Sources: La Jornada, 07/04/98; Agence France-Presse, 07/14/98; The Miami Herald, 07/15/98; The News, 07/16/98; Excelsior, Novedades, 07/16/98, 07/17/98; El Universal, 07/17/98, 07/20/98)

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