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Analysis: Reports of Cuban Food Shortages, Economic Crisis Inaccurate

Nelson ValdÃ©s

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by Nelson Valdes
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In recent weeks, journalists and scholars have published numerous reports and dire predictions on Cuban economic difficulties resulting from delays in scheduled arrivals of Soviet cargo ships. One example is Alfred Padula's "Soviet Delays Lead to Flour and Grain Shortages in Cuba" (The Times of the Americas, 03/21/90, p. 6).

Points of clarification and comments on these and related reports follow.

1-Cuba's food problem has been imposed by conditions external to its economy, such as upheaval in the Soviet Union.

2-Padula writes that bread prices have increased by 25% in Havana, while elsewhere "bread prices remain stable but bread rations have been reduced." Bread is not rationed in Havana province because average per capita consumption has been consistently lower than in other provinces. It should also be noted that the bread price hike in Havana province was only five cents per pound.

3-Latin American governments typically respond to product shortages by imposing price hikes, thereby reducing or eliminating access to these commodities by low-income households. Last year, Venezuelan workers responded to austerity measures by rioting in the streets, burning buses, and looting stores. Hundreds died in the rioting. Argentines, and most recently, Brazilians, have responded to similar government actions by looting supermarkets. In Cuba, however, the government has sought to ensure that low-income households do not disproportionately bear the burden of product shortages. Next, hospitals and school lunch programs were not affected by austerity measures imposed as a result of grain and other basic foodstuff shortages.

4-About 159,000 tons of citrus exports to the USSR and the Eastern bloc failed to leave Cuban ports, result of long delays in the arrival of Soviet merchant ships. The Cuban government distributed the fruit to citizens gratis or at low prices. Capitalist logic elsewhere in the region in a similar set of circumstances would lead to destruction of perishable goods, or simply permitting them to rot.

5-Padula writes, "It is significant that while Cuba supplies two-thirds of its own grain requirements, the blame for the current shortage has been placed almost exclusively on the Soviets and the world market. The government has admitted that its system of flour and grain reserves is inadequate and that delays in even one shipment can cause significant problems." Cuban grain output has increased in recent years. Rather than building large reserves unnecessary until the present , the government chose to make grain available to consumers.

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Before 1959, Cuba imported 88% of grains, 63% of meat products, and 90% of fish consumed on the island. Until 1970, the government effectively continued the island's "tradition" of importing foodstuffs. Since 1972, that pattern has changed, result of a food import substitution policy. Beginning in 1980, the government prioritized imports of food processing machinery, equipment and even entire factories. In 1986, Cuba imported 636,000 tons of flour. The current figure of 600,000 tons of flour imports indicates a significant increase in domestic output in less than four years. In contrast, food production growth rates in Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Peru and Haiti were negative in the 1980-85 period. For Latin America as a whole, per capita foodstuffs output dropped 0.6% since 1981. Meanwhile, between 1980 and 1985, regional food imports dropped an average 7% per year. (1)

6-In a related vein, the US media has carried reports in the past two years about Cuba's increasing economic problems. These difficulties are often indirectly linked to President Fidel Castro's refusal to follow the political and economic reform "examples" of the Soviet Union or certain East European countries. These economic reforms typically involve the reduction or elimination of social welfare programs (also known as the social wage). US media accounts rarely point out that in the 1980s Cuban economic performance, both in general terms and in meeting the basic needs of the vast majority of citizens, has equalled and usually surpassed that of most Latin American nations.

Cuba's economic performance is rather remarkable in the context of the "lost development decade," characterized by low world market prices, foreign debt crisis, and global economic recession (or "slow growth"). Add to this the continued US economic embargo imposed on Cuba. The UN Economic Commission for Latin America in May 1989 noted "a notorious and equally persistent drop in historical rates of product growth and, given demographic growth, in the value of the per capita gross domestic product in almost all the countries of the region." Only two countries were exceptions: Colombia and Cuba. (2) Evolution of per capita gross domestic product, Latin America and Cuba, 1982-1988 Latin America Cuba 1982 -3.5 3.3 1983 -4.7 4.3 1984 1.4 6.5 1985 1.4 3.9 1986 1.6 0.3 1987 0.3 -4.7 1988 -1.5 1.0 1981-1988 -6.6 33.1 (cumulative variation) Source: United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Preliminary Overview of the Latin American Economy. Santiago, Chile, 1988, p. 18. (Document LG/G.1536) (1) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Estado mundial de la agricultura y la alimentacion, annual reports. (2) United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Dynamics of Social Deterioration in Latin America and the Caribbean. Santiago de Chile, May 3, 1989. Mimeo., p. 2. * Nelson Valdes is associate professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico, and LADB project director.

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