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## Hunger-related Deaths in Sierra Tarahumara Reflect Impact of Climate Change on Subsistence Farmers

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexico has long known that climate change would have a negative impact on the country's agricultural production and, in particular, on subsistence producers. The problem took center stage when reports started filtering from the Sierra Tarahumara in mid-January that extended drought had so decimated the crops grown by the Raramuri indigenous communities that several people had died from hunger-related causes.

The Raramuris, who live in isolated mountainous areas, are often out of sight and out of mind. But this situation changed when Ramón Gardea, who described himself as secretary of the community of Carichí, posted a video on YouTube to report that about 50 Tarahumara Indians had committed suicide in recent months because they were despondent over not being able to feed their children.

The video attracted a groundswell of support from citizens around the country, who organized on social networks to collect food and other supplies to send to the region.

The first to respond were private institutions and foundations such as the Mexican Red Cross, the Fundación Telmex, and the Chihuahua-based Alimentando Esperanza. The latter, owned by the agricultural enterprise Empresariado Chihuahuense AC, Nakúropo, was in a position to immediately distribute food supplies such as milk, corn, and meats.

The accounts of mass suicides turned out to be false but not the reports of several malnutrition-related deaths. Chihuahua Gov. César Duarte Jáquez acknowledged that at least 28 people had died of malnutrition in the 22 Tarahumara municipalities during a 12-month period. "Twenty eight deaths are too many," said the governor. He pointed out, however, that the number of people who died of malnutrition in 2011 was down from 47 in 2010.

"It took false reports of mass suicide for Mexicans to rally in great number to the aid of the legendary Tarahumara Indians, who are facing a season of starvation," said the Los Angeles Times.

Local activists said hunger-related deaths have, unfortunately, been a common occurrence in the Sierra Tarahumara in recent years. "[People in the region] die every year from hunger; it's just that this year, it's worse," said Liliana Flores, a founder of the farmers' rights organization El Barzón, which works closely with subsistence growers and indigenous communities.

### *Drought decimates corn crop in Raramuri communities*

By some estimates, drought and freezing temperatures in the Sierra Tarahumara region in the southwestern area of the state reduced corn production by about 20,000 tons in 2011, depriving the Raramuris of one of the staples needed to meet their nutritional needs. Beyond the initial loss of crops, the extreme dry conditions also destroyed the roots, making it impossible to plant anew.

Arturo Fuentes, an official with the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), said the situation put the Raramuris in a terrible bind because scarce reserves dwindled very quickly.

Officials said the drop in production in the Sierra Tarahumara reflected the fortunes of the state of Chihuahua, which experienced significant declines in production of corn, beans, and oats. The state's 2011 bean crop, for example, amounted to only 20,000 tons, compared with a more common annual production ranging between 80,000 and 120,000 tons.

Extended drought in Mexico has already prompted the Mexican government to forecast sharp reductions in agricultural production ([SourceMex, Aug. 11, 2010](#), and [Jan. 4, 2012](#)).

The plight of the Raramuris also prompted some action by the federal government. At a function in Mexico City with US Ambassador Anthony Wayne in mid-January, President Felipe Calderón said his administration has been paying close attention to recent developments in southwestern Chihuahua.

Calderón and Wayne signed a memorandum of understanding for US-Mexico cooperation on an environmental initiative to reduce emissions and promote reforestation in Mexico. The US pledged US\$70 million over the next five years to help with the effort. "I spent several days in the Sierra Tarahumara, where we were supervising some projects to support the Raramuri population, which is suffering from these environmentally related problems," said the president.

Calderón said his government was providing emergency assistance to the residents of the Sierra Tarahumara as well as taking steps to address the drought-related problems affecting northern areas of the country, including Zacatecas, Durango, and Chihuahua.

The president said SEDESOL has moved to provide water to nearly 2,000 communities suffering from drought in the states of Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Durango, Nuevo León, Sonora, Sinaloa, San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Baja California Sur, and Tamaulipas. But he pointed out that the problem requires a long-term solution, including measures to address the impact of global climate change on Mexico.

"It is not enough to deliver provisions of water," Calderón added during his meeting with Wayne.

"We need long-term measures that promote structural changes and address climate change at the global level. The poorest populations are paying the consequences of climate change, and now is the time to act."

Despite Calderón's commitment to assist agricultural producers affected by climate change, many farmers around the country continue to press the government to provide immediate assistance.

### *Farmers press government for water fund*

A movement known as the Caravana del Hambre (Hunger Caravan) organized a march from the state capital of Chihuahua to Mexico City, where a large demonstration was planned for the Zócalo square. About 600 farmers from Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas participated in the march. "Accompanied by hundreds of horses and several tow trucks, trailers, and tractors, they reached this state to set up a temporary camp," the daily newspaper La Jornada San Luis said on Jan. 20, referring to the arrival of the caravan to the city of San Luis Potosí.

One of the event's organizers, Felipe Pinedo Hernández of the Frente Popular de Lucha de Zacatecas (FPLZ), criticized the administration for failing to support a proposal in Congress to create a fund of 10 billion pesos (US\$767 million) to provide direct assistance to the areas suffering from

extreme drought around the country. "The federal government has not offered any evidence that it is aware of the catastrophic consequences to the population," said Pinedo Hernández.

Others like the Confederación Nacional Agronómica (CNA) suggested that the administration needed to spend about 56 billion pesos (US\$4.2 billion) in the near term to help address problems resulting from global climate change.

The CNA, which is affiliated with the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), represents more than 120,000 agricultural-extension agents in Mexico. It accused the administration of focusing more on distributing supplies during an election year than on addressing long-term problems. "We are facing one of the worst food crises in the past 50 years," said CNA president Lino Velázquez Morales.

Velázquez Morales acknowledged, however, that the results of any measures taken now to help boost Mexico's food sovereignty would not be apparent at least for another presidential term.

The complaint that the party in office has used assistance for electoral purposes has been common in Mexican politics ([SourceMex, June 7, 2000](#), [Oct. 12, 2005](#), and [Aug. 8, 2007](#)), and this year's presidential election is no exception. The concern prompted Deputy Gerardo Sánchez García, a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), to request a meeting with Interior Secretary Alejandro Poiré to obtain the administration's assurances that the 34 billion pesos (US\$2.6 billion) in drought-related aid would not be used to bolster the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) ahead of the election.

Sánchez García also criticized the administration decision to veto the water fund proposed by Congress. "The administration says that it cannot provide 10 billion pesos that we requested for the water fund, and now it wants to spend 34 billion pesos on what it deems as measures to combat climate change," said Sánchez García. [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 25, 2012, reported at 13.02 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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