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Central America Drought Crisis

by LADB Staff

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Throughout late July and August, international organizations such as the UN's World Food Program (WFP) have shipped food donations to Central American nations suffering from severe drought and food shortages (see NotiCen, 2001-07-26). Nevertheless, some Central American presidents have been slow to declare states of emergency or even to acknowledge the hunger in their countries. The Comité Regional de Recursos Hidráulicos (CRRH) informed Central American leaders in June of an impending drought.

Few regional authorities attended a meeting called by CRRH June 12 to report on the likelihood that rainfall would be sparse throughout the summer. El Salvador's Agriculture Minister Salvador Urrutia said later that he knew about the CRRH report but took no action until July. Meanwhile, international organizations were reporting widespread malnutrition and even starvation. The WFP at first estimated that at least one million people in the region faced famine. The figure later climbed to 1.6 million roughly 5% of the region's population.

The WFP said in June it had sent food aid for 250,000 people in Honduras. At the same time, the Honduran government was forced to use its strategic reserves of corn and beans to offset the drop in supplies of grains and other basic foodstuffs. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said crop losses affected 28,000 farms in central and southern Honduras, where 20% of the corn crop was lost. While losses did not seem devastating on the national level, losses were nearly total in some areas of the country creating large pockets of starvation and malnutrition.

Honduran President Carlos Flores declared states of emergency in drought-stricken zones in mid-July. The declaration cleared the way for distribution of government food reserves. Vice Minister of Agriculture Julian Suazo said the drought had affected some 100 municipalities in eight departments in the south, southeast, and west that were facing serious food shortages. Suazo said the WFP found that food shortages were critical in 57 municipalities where 85% of the basic-grain harvest had been lost. The Ministry also requested an additional 4,000 metric tons of food from the WFP.

Mario Salaverria, president of the Salvadoran Cámara Agropecuaria y Agroindustrial (CAMAGRO), warned in July that the agricultural sector was on the verge of collapse. He attributed the agricultural crisis as much to government policy as to natural disasters. The government's neoliberal economic model, he said, favored exports and, by lowering tariffs, it abandoned agriculture to foreign imports. "Developing countries have tariffs averaging 20%, while in developed countries the average is 200% in the agriculture sector," Salaverria said. "

There is no hunger," says Nicaraguan president

The WFP has said the drought in parts of Nicaragua has created a serious food shortage for more than 220,000 people. At the end of July, WFP sources said they did not have enough food to take care

of all the families affected by the crisis in the northern coffee region. Besides the drought's effect on food crops, coffee growers in the northern part of the country cite falling coffee prices as a major source of the problem, causing a flow of economic refugees into the cities.

Returning from an extensive trip abroad at the end of July, President Arnoldo Aleman said he would not declare a state of emergency. A few days later he said, "There is no hunger....It's an invention." He accused the opposition Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) of spreading the rumors of hunger. The Sandinistas would like there to be increases in rice and bean prices, he said, but there has not been "so much as a one-centavo increase." Aleman said Sandinistas had stirred up fear in the coffee-growing regions of Matagalpa and Jinotega departments to drive unemployed coffee workers into the cities and cause havoc. He said refugees were moving out of just three of the 15 municipalities in Matagalpa department. "Why is it that there is hunger only in the Sandinista municipalities?" asked Aleman. "Could it be that God doesn't like Sandinista mayors?"

Nicaragua is in the midst of its presidential election campaign and FSLN candidate Daniel Ortega is in a close race with Enrique Bolanos, Aleman's former vice president. As for nongovernmental organizations pressing him for a declaration of emergency, Aleman said they were using the issue to get money for themselves out of international donors. "They are simply institutions that live off of that aid," he said. The story was much the same in El Salvador where authorities acknowledged huge crop losses valued at more than US\$22 million but insisted there was no hunger to the decree that there was in Nicaragua and Honduras.

Critics of the government, like Jorge Villacorta, a deputy from the opposition Centro Democratico Unido (CDU), maintained that the administration of President Francisco Flores had delayed an analysis of the situation and did not really know the extent of the crisis. Despite the WFP survey, the government began its own study Aug. 7 to determine whether the problem warranted declaring a state of emergency. At the end of July, Flores minimized the extent of the problem and said, "We do not foresee any supply problem."

Agriculture Minister Salvador Urrutia said Aug. 7 that there was no shortage of basic grains and that additional grains could be imported from elsewhere in Central America as needed. In an interview with the Los Angeles daily *La Opinion*, Vice President Carlos Quintanilla said that Flores had set up a commission to study the problem and that, while there were joint plans with WFP to make up for lost crops in the medium term, there was currently no hunger in El Salvador. But estimates of crop losses in the eastern part of the country went as high as 75%-100%, affecting 37,000 families.

The government plans a temporary public-works jobs program called *Alimentos por Trabajo* that would give work to those who lost their crops in exchange for food. Another program called *Plan Sembrador* will distribute seeds, fertilizers, technical assistance, and credits in some areas to prepare for new plantings in the fall.

No such assistance is planned for the worst-hit eastern section because authorities consider growing conditions there inadequate for any new cultivation this year. The plan also allows farmers to restructure their debts with the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario (BFA) and get fresh credits at 11% or 12% interest for the next planting cycle. Instead of a declaration of emergency, on Aug. 8, Flores

declared the lesser "state of yellow alert." But the civic organization Foro de la Sociedad Civil de El Salvador called the gesture "a joke." Foro members presented the Legislative Assembly with a petition demanding a state of emergency declaration. But Flores defended the yellow-alert status and said the government would monitor the situation. He said if there were a crisis it would be apparent during the first week in October.

Forty-one deaths reported in Guatemala

In Guatemala, the media reported more than 1,200 persons were suffering from malnutrition and as many as 41 drought-related deaths had occurred this year in the municipalities of Jocotan and Camotan 260 km east of the capital in the department of Chiquimula. The Agriculture Ministry reported the loss of corn and rice crops worth US\$14.8 million. At first, the government appeared not to take the crisis seriously. Vice President Francisco Reyes seemed to find little remarkable in the crisis, saying the problem had been around for the past 100 years. The Agriculture Ministry said farmers were exaggerating the seriousness of grain shortages to force prices up. Some people like to "put on a show," Reyes said, adding that some businesses attempting to send aid to the stricken communities "are taking advantage of the occasion to criticize the government and create an image for themselves."

President Alfonso Portillo announced a commission to study the problem but said he inherited the situation from previous administrations. He also claimed to have done more than previous administrations to deal with food security. Among the steps Portillo said he had already taken was the recent tax bill (see NotiCen, 2001-08-09). That bitterly contested tax increase was one part of the fix, he said, since 0.5% of the 2% increase was earmarked for food security.

In early August, Portillo said he was surprised by the great "scandal" being made over the hunger in Chiquimula department, and he noted that, since 80% of Guatemalans were poor, they faced the same problem everywhere. "But it's good that society is concerned today about the problem of malnourishment," Portillo said. By the end of August, there was heavy pressure on the president, the disaster relief agency Coordinadora Nacional para la Reduccion de Desastres (CONRED), and other government agencies to snap out of their indifference to the crisis.

The daily Prensa Libre published photographs of starving people and charged that it was the result of "national indolence." "How is this nightmare possible in an agricultural country with prodigious resources that even now permits the sale abroad of basic grains?," asked a Prensa Libre editorial. After a meeting with government officials, including Eduardo Paredes of CONRED, Camotan Mayor Alvaro Guerra declared his own "state of calamity" under municipal law. But Paredes said the step was premature and that only CONRED could make the declaration. As pressure mounted on the Portillo administration to take action, and while aid began to arrive from foreign embassies, the daily Siglo Veintiuno reported that Chiquimula Congressman Baudilio Hichos threatened an exhaustive investigation into who suggested the declaration of calamity in Camotan.

On Sept. 3, Portillo declared a "state of public calamity" for a 30-day period throughout the country. A presidential spokesperson said the declaration covered all departments because food shortages had struck other parts of the country.

WFP representative for Central America and the Caribbean Francisco Roque Castro said in August that the regional crisis was "chronic" and was a major factor preventing development. In an interview with the Nicaraguan daily La Prensa, Roque presented a picture of a region with fundamental structural flaws. His catalogue of defects included insufficient spending on education and health, economic and social inequality, narrow crop diversification, and lack of technical assistance to farmers. He said these weaknesses mean that the region goes from one natural disaster Hurricane Mitch, earthquakes, and drought to another with few resources to recover. Roque identified extreme economic inequality in the region as the core of the problem since it led to nutritional inequality. Another factor, he said, was the mistake of depending on such exports as coffee for insertion into the global economy. "If Nicaragua produced microchips...what difference would the price of coffee make?"

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