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LADB Staff

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Rural Hunger Persists in Central America

by LADB Staff

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Over the past year, the rural poor of four Central American countries Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador suffered marked increases in malnutrition.

In 2001, an adverse climactic phenomenon known as El Nino destroyed agricultural harvests throughout the region, bringing about an increase in malnutrition. Low international commodity prices, especially for coffee, and the loss of jobs in the region's export sectors have further exacerbated high levels of malnutrition. Following El Nino's devastating effects on Central America's harvest in June 2001, Central American governments reacted slowly and ineffectually to the crisis (see NotiCen, 2001-09-20). The Nicaraguan government denied that lost harvests had brought about hunger in the country, while the Salvadoran government generally downplayed the severity of the crisis.

By the beginning of 2002, Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo had acknowledged that there was hunger in his country, but he insisted that Guatemala was not undergoing an economic crisis (see NotiCen, 2002-01-24). Reports say that some 700,000 people currently suffer from hunger in Central America. Between July and November 2001, the incidence of acute child malnutrition in southern Honduras increased from 2.7% to 5.9%.

At the end of April 2002, a UN official indicated that poor rural Salvadorans also confronted a situation of insecure food supplies. In Nicaragua, some specialists have begun speaking of the "Africanization" of poverty. Eastern Guatemala, a land of bone-dry pastures scattered with shrubs and cacti, has suffered the most malnutrition because of the recent calamities. Between September 2001 and March 2002, more than 125 Guatemalan children died from severe malnutrition, while 6,000 more were reported to be at risk of dying. At the same time, 60,000 Guatemalan children under age five suffer from acute malnutrition. This marks a 16% rise from the percentage reported in 2000.

The increase is even more alarming considering that, before the latest crisis, Guatemala already had the highest level of chronic malnutrition in Central America. Because of the drought, over 65,000 Honduran families lost 135,000 metric tons of crops in 2001, according to the UN's World Food Program (WFP).

For all of Central America, drought-caused losses ranged from 40% to 100% of crops during the first harvest in 2001. In El Salvador, the drought also lowered water levels at hydroelectric dams along the Lempa River, threatening the country's source of energy. In Guatemala, the problems originating with the drought were exacerbated by the lack of alternative employment for campesinos who were among the 250,000 workers laid off on coffee plantations because of plummeting world coffee prices. Further compounding the problem is the US economic slowdown, leading to the loss of thousands of jobs in Central America's maquiladora assembly plants, which have been a source of jobs for destitute people from the countryside.

Malnutrition is rooted in region's economic inequalities Many also attribute the rise in malnutrition to highly inequitable distributions of wealth and the lack of economic opportunities for most people in the region. "We must be clear: these problems are rooted in the region's economic inequalities," says Celia Medrano, general coordinator the independent Comision de Derechos Humanos de Centroamerica (CODEHUCA). Higher degrees of malnutrition seem to correlate with greater levels of inequality.

Although Guatemala has a higher per capita income than Honduras and Nicaragua, it has suffered the most malnutrition in the face of recent calamities. Some attribute this to Guatemala's history of greater income disparity between the upper classes and the rural indigenous population. Brazil, the only country in Latin America that has a higher level of malnutrition than Guatemala, is broadly understood to have the most inequitable distribution of wealth in the hemisphere.

Emergency program aims to avert crisis In March, the WFP announced that it was launching a US \$4.8 million emergency program to avert a humanitarian crisis. The program was to be funded by the international community, but as of the beginning of May, the WFP reported that it had received only one-third of the funds pledged. Meanwhile, the Guatemalan government has demonstrated little commitment to devote scarce resources to alleviate the severe malnutrition. Despite the humanitarian crisis already underway in 2001, the Guatemalan military spent 84% more than what the country's Congress had originally budgeted for the military.

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