

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Méndez

Hunger and disease stalk the land

The IMF-dictated farm policy of scant investment and low price supports is taking a terrible toll.

The national grain stock of the National Commission of Popular Subsistence (Conasupo) has fallen to such a level that it no longer has even the 'technical reserves' to feed the population in case a climatological or other disaster should occur over the next six months," reported the Mexican press on May 22. The week before, the daily *El Heraldo de México* had already observed that Conasupo's corn and bean warehouses were empty, and that the cited "technical reserve"—which is supposed to equal six months worth of consumption—should serve not only in case of a natural disaster, but also to regulate the national market to avoid speculation.

Perhaps most serious is the fact that the weather disaster warned about is already here, and so, too, is the speculation. In early June, it was reported that the products that raised the inflation index the most were fruit, vegetables, and grain.

But the food shortage is not merely a statistical or technical affair. It signifies widespread diseases and the deaths of thousands, perhaps millions, of human beings. As a direct result of the deterioration in Mexican living standards between 1982 and 1987, a "scandalous rise" in the incidence of diseases once considered under control or eradicated outright has been noted, according to Olivia López Arellano and José Blanco Gol, professors of social medicine at the Metropolitan Autonomous University-Xochimilco.

The professors issued a report on June 12 which stated that "between 1979 and 1986, the rise in deaths from

malaria is shocking. In said period, malaria mortality went from 30 to more than 160 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, although the ascending curve is most clearly seen as of 1982, the year in which the index takes off."

In 1986, the report goes on, 22,000 cases of dengue fever were registered, a figure that represents a 36% increase over 1985. The increase in such conditions as parasites, gastroenteritis, severe respiratory infections, pneumonias, and pulmonary tuberculosis, was evident as of 1973, but the tendency for a sharper rise manifested itself in the last six years. "Diphtheria, which during the 1975-80 period showed a clear decline and from 1981 to 1983 had a zero rate of incidence, returned in 1984, 1985, and 1986, reaching levels equivalent to those reported in 1977."

According to the June 12 issue of the daily *Excelsior*, "an outbreak of measles, detected in the northern hills of Puebla, has combined with serious malnutrition to cause the deaths of 50 children in the past 20 days." This report was given by the chief of epidemiology of the University Hospital, Maximino Betanzos, who added that "in epidemiological terms, the growth rate has become inverted: *More children are dying than are being born in that zone.*"

The future—if the Carlos Salinas de Gortari government keeps implementing the genocidal conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund—is still worse: outright starvation and epidemics that could become pandemics. Already Mexican agriculture is facing a disaster of major proportions

in view of the high interest rates charges, low price guarantees, and ravages of the drought—worsened by lack of investment and maintenance in irrigation infrastructure.

"Besides the delay in planting of some 70% of agricultural territory, the poor or non-existent germination of crops already sown, and the outbreak of multiple calamities, national production of basic foods is seriously threatened because of the drought," says a report by Julieta Medina published in the June 12 issue of the newspaper *El Financiero*.

Medina continues: "We are facing a loss of more than 4 million tons of food from the spring-summer crops, of which 3.6 million tons are corn and 300,000 beans; the rest is sorghum, wheat and rice, among others, according to the National Farmers Confederation and the Independent Farmers Confederation." The current spring-summer growing cycle, highly dependent on weather conditions, is facing terrible conditions: Rains have only been regular in the state of Chiapas, scarce in 8 other states, and non-existent in 22 others.

Yet the Salinas government insists that it is cheaper to import food than to invest in infrastructure and to set fair price guarantees for the producers. On June 9, the Bank of Mexico reported that the farm trade surplus of the country as of February had fallen 81% with respect to February of 1988. The reason? A 148% increase in imports, and in particular, of basic grains.

In mid-June, Agriculture Minister Jorge de la Vega Domínguez told the Congress that "the situation of Mexican farming is worrisome; we are getting further and further from food self-sufficiency; decapitalization of the countryside and low price supports are provoking bankruptcies," but he made no proposal to resolve the problem.