

Andean Report by Liliana Pazos

Chronic hunger plagues Peru

Falling production and an incompetent food import policy are raising the threat of starvation.

The spread of malnutrition and infant mortality in Peru has reached the point that one columnist described the situation as "a virtual return to the Middle Ages."

Already in 1984, after more than a decade of International Monetary Fund prescriptions which laid waste what little Peruvian industry there was, Peru's population was registering malnutrition levels of 56.7% in the rural zones and 23.7% in the urban areas, according to the National Census of Nutrition and Nourishment.

The most recent data reveal that as of March 1989, malnutrition among children in the marginal urban zones around Lima is between 40% and 50%. Even as of 1987, Peru held third place in the world for infant mortality levels, surpassed only by Bolivia and Haiti. In 1988, 36,000 Peruvian children died, reported Washington Toledo, executive director of the Health Ministry's Respiratory Disease Prevention and Control Department, in an interview to the Lima daily *Expreso* of June 15. The majority of the deaths were due, according to Toledo, to inadequate handling of infection from the common cold, in other words, a combination of inadequate nutritional defenses and lack of medical services.

The causes for this terrible reality are varied, but they have been aggravated in recent years by a deadly dependency on food imports, and by a disastrous redistributionist policy in the agricultural sector, which has not only led to a collapse in production but has worsened the country's food dependency.

In 1989, a 6.6% fall in agricultural production is expected. According to preliminary figures published in July by the Banco Agrario, the amount of crop land financed by the bank fell 10% in 1988-89, compared to the previous year. The most important crops affected included rice, with cultivated area down 16%, and potatoes, down 17%. Other crops have been reduced as much as 29%.

Given that rice and potatoes are two of the most basic foods in the diet of Peru's poor, one can imagine the toll such reductions will take. In anticipation of shortages, the prices have already begun to rise, with a little help from the government.

The case of rice is most scandalous. The government's decision to end rice subsidies has followed the importation of some 150,000 tons of the grain so far this year. Despite Economics Minister César Vásquez's claims that such "free trade" will solve the shortage problem, the internal price of rice continues to soar.

On June 30, the Peruvian press reported that the price of chicken rose in less than a week from 3,998 intis to 4,498 intis per kilogram. According to the president of the Poultry Growers Association, the increase was directly related to the growing price of corn, which is selling on the international market at the equivalent of 480 intis, but domestically at 650 intis! The explanation? The government is eliminating food and agricultural input subsidies in order to increase its foreign exchange reserves. On June 13, the Agriculture Ministry decreed an end

to rice subsidies, which had amounted to some \$33 million a month.

On June 20, the president of the Foreign Trade Institute said that the country had achieved a favorable trade balance for the first four months of 1989 of \$563 million. During that same period, the price of food doubled! Beans cost more than meat, which today costs 6,800 intis per kilogram. The price of vegetables has doubled, chicken prices have risen 50%, and the price for a kilo of fish doubled.

To this can be added the severe deterioration in agricultural infrastructure and machinery. Preliminary statistics from the Banco Agrario—covering 50% of the nation's cultivated zones—reveal that investment in infrastructural works fell 7% in monetary terms. Purchase of machinery and equipment collapsed by 76%. The combined effect of a dramatic reduction in cultivated land, and the low or non-existent levels of technology used to exploit that land, is producing a full-scale disaster.

As a columnist commented June 27 in the Colombian daily *El Tiempo*, "It is hard to believe that in the twilight of this enlightened century . . . people are still dying of hunger. And not in low numbers. . . . According to Jonathan Tennenbaum . . . 50,000 people are currently dying every day, of whom 14,000 are children. . . . It is a virtual return to the Middle Ages, when starvation and plague ravaged the population of the Old World, as also in Asia."

The columnist was referring to a presentation given by Jonathan Tennenbaum, director of the German Fusion Energy Forum, to the XIII Congress of the Colombian Grain Growers Federation (Fenalce) on June 23, at which Tennenbaum urged that if humanity is to survive, food production must be at least doubled worldwide.