

Andean Report by Leonor Rubiano

Venezuela holocaust looms

The decline in food consumption and resurgence of disease have put the country on the road to disaster.

Venezuela is facing a food emergency of dramatic proportions, not just in terms of production but also of consumption. The implications of this crisis are increasingly evident in the resurgence of diseases long since eradicated from Venezuelan soil.

According to Agriculture Minister Ciro Añez, the country's food dependency has reached the point that 70% of all grains, 90% of all food oils, and 55% of milk are imported. Since 1989, when the Carlos Andrés Pérez government adopted International Monetary Fund (IMF) prescriptions, agricultural production has fallen 18%. According to the dairy producers organization Fegalago, the country has gone from 17 million head of dairy cows in 1989 to only 11 million today, which reflects a deficit of more than 700 million liters of milk. Of Venezuela's minimum milk consumption of 2.1 billion liters a year, the country is today only producing 1.2 billion liters, and a drop of another 100 million liters is expected this year. This collapse in production has already led to the closing of seven pasteurization plants.

To this situation can be added the fall in consumer buying power, a drop reflected in reduced consumption of basic foods. This situation was detailed by Zeilath Carrasco, president of the Cattlemen's Federation, who indicated that it is only this decline in consumption which has prevented the emergence of severe food shortages.

But what has inevitably occurred is a resurgence of disease. According to information released at the Tenth Latin American Congress on Nutri-

tion held in Caracas in early November, a full one-fourth of Venezuelans, that is, some 15 million people, would have to spend the entirety of their income on food purchases to meet their nutritional needs. This, of course, is impossible because there are other living expenses to be met. As a result, a fourth of the population is malnourished.

Possibly the most tragic consequence of this under-consumption is the return of tuberculosis, which had been eliminated as the second leading cause of death in Venezuela and which in the late 1980s was in tenth place among all causes of mortality in the country. Today, it is as if Venezuela were back in the 1970s, with 5,457 cases of tuberculosis registered so far in 1994, according to the Health Ministry.

And so, Venezuela has gone from a 2% per year decline in that disease to a yearly increase of 3%! Respiratory disease specialist Alex Smith explained: "The incidence of tuberculosis is fundamentally linked to the economic and social deterioration in the country." That means malnutrition and overcrowding, as corroborated by statistics which placed nearly 14% of the population in the category of "absolute poverty."

We see the same situation with the ongoing dengue fever epidemic, due to a lack of potable water, which is forcing Venezuelans to store water in receptacles which facilitate the reproduction of the mosquito that transmits the disease. Again, this shows the connection to "the economic and social deterioration in the country." The

figures are really alarming with respect to AIDS. According to Dr. Arellano Medici, the number of people registered as HIV-positive easily surpasses 500,000, making Venezuela the country in Latin America with the third highest number of people who are HIV positive.

Given this situation—a direct consequence of the Pérez government's servile application of the IMF's "structural adjustment programs" which put servicing the foreign debt as a priority over human life—President Rafael Caldera told the opening of the Tenth Latin American Congress on Nutrition, "We cannot understand how economic development and an improvement in the statistics can be accompanied incomprehensibly by an increase in the poverty indices. . . . Saying that people must live better and should necessarily be the beneficiaries of government action should not be called populism. Populism is dictating demagogic measures which have an immediate, apparent impact but lead to worse ills. . . . We have a commitment to give the population reasonable consumption levels."

The fact is that Venezuela's agrarian potential is enormous, with an estimated 5 million or more hectares of fertile land, primarily in the states of Apure, Barinas, Portuguesa, and Guárico, not to mention the extraordinary potential of the Orinoco River banks and southern Lake Maracaibo. With a proper investment of infrastructure and technology, the country could be a major food producer, with surplus to export.

Critical to an immediate reversal of the biological holocaust threatening Venezuela is diversion of the funds used to pay the foreign debt, which currently absorbs nearly 50% of the national budget, to strengthen the real economy and put it at the service of human beings, not usury.