

Dateline Mexico by Benjamin Castro

An 'unrealistic' agrarian policy

Forty percent of Mexicans are malnourished, yet the government is sticking with the IMF's agriculture policy.

It would appear that "realism," the supreme political currency of the de la Madrid regime, is only applied case by case in Mexico these days. While "realism" is the argument invoked to justify acceptance of the International Monetary Fund's austerity programs, this presumed realism is put aside when dealing with the desperately needy agricultural sector.

This practice is proving highly dangerous. The Mexican government is behaving like a distracted automobile driver crossing railroad tracks without realizing that a train is bearing down on him at full speed. In this case, the "train" is the food scarcity which threatens mass starvation and social explosions, far more devastating for the nation than the Sept. 19 earthquakes.

While de la Madrid's economic cabinet endlessly debates the "failures in application" or the niceties of the program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (these same officials become upset when one calls "their program" what they prefer to call the Immediate Program of Economic Reordering), agriculture is collapsing.

Look at a few facts. According to a report in the Oct. 14 edition of the Mexican daily *El Universal*, some 40% of all Mexicans lack sufficient income to feed themselves adequately. According to another report published by the Mexico City daily *El Financiero*, the minimum wage has lost 39.13% of its real buying power

in just the past few years.

This means that the fall in the minimum wage is almost exactly equal to the percentage of Mexicans who are starving.

How does the wage "factor" affect the agricultural "sector," the "realistic" technocrat may ask? According to the National Cattleraisers' Association, the National Union of Pig Farmers, and the National Union of Chicken Farmers, the demand for meat of all kinds fell 40% in the last few years.

But that is only part of the picture. The destruction is spreading to other sectors as well. According to a mid-October report by the Ministry of Agriculture and Hydraulic Resources, harvests of all sorts shrunk by 3% during the month of September. This confirms that Mexico is suffering an annual decline of approximately 40% of its crops, according to official statistics. The ministry reports that 320,000 hectares once dedicated to the cultivation of beans, safflower, and cotton have been abandoned, while the fall-winter harvests are expected to fall 11%.

Natural catastrophes are compounding the economic disaster. Apart from the devastation caused by the earthquakes, in the states of Sonora and Sinaloa, two of the country's largest food-producers, more than 150,000 hectares of corn, soy, and legumes were destroyed by hurricane Waldo.

However, the problem of the producers and cattle raisers cannot be reduced to the current 40% collapse in

demand. It goes back further, to when interest rates were drastically increased, to when the cutoff of imports substantially increased the cost of the vital tools and fertilizer used by the producers, to when the government decided to let the sector die by refusing to establish a fair price for the sale of rural products in the cities, while importing these same products, at much greater cost, from abroad.

The dramatic situation of agriculture is immediately reflected in the drastic increase in malnutrition reported in the country. Mexico, like the rest of the so-called Third World countries, suffers a chronic problem of malnutrition, which the agricultural collapse will aggravate horribly. The official statistics spell it out. Alfonso Cabrera, an official of the National Food Program (PRONAL), spoke Oct. 11 of at least 33 million malnourished Mexicans, out of a population of nearly 75 million—that is, nearly 40%.

Blanca de Peredo, official of the U.N.'s World Food Program, referred at the same time to 40% of Mexican children suffering "first-degree malnutrition"—very dangerous, according to the official, because the symptoms are not noticed until serious diseases have already been contracted. The officials of PRONAL explained that 54.2% of all Mexicans have a daily food deficiency of 903 grams, out of a minimum total diet of 2,116 grams.

At this point, the observer may well ask: When will the bomb explode? The answer is, at the point that food scarcities begin to affect the supplies of the major cities like Monterrey and Mexico City. A spokesman for the ministry of trade declared Oct. 11, "We still have at least six months worth of basic food stocks in reserve." Many observers consider this optimistic estimate most "unrealistic."