

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Méndez

The worst drought in 20 years

The de la Madrid government is refusing to declare a national emergency, for fear of losing the presidential elections.

Despite the terrible drought that is ravaging Mexico and threatening its population with starvation, President Miguel de la Madrid is refusing to declare the nation in a state of emergency, just as he refused to do in 1985 when devastation wrought by the earthquake more than merited such action. Ever present in the collective mind of the De la Madrid government is this year's election.

Faced with demands by farmers in the northeast for declaration of a national emergency, the minister of agricultural and water resources (SARH), Eduardo Pesqueira Olea, was forced to give a press conference May 12, at which he "acknowledged" that Mexico is suffering its worst drought in 20 years, and that the situation has turned critical, with the nation's dams operating at 20% of their storage capacity.

The immediate consequence of these water levels is that as much as 400,000 hectares of irrigated land in Sinaloa and Sonora will not be sown. This means that not only will the national production of wheat, rice, and oil-producing crops fall, but at least 15,000 peasants from the northeast alone will be out of work.

The situation is no better elsewhere. Pesqueira said that rainfall levels in the immediate future will determine the agricultural yield in Mexico's center, south, and southeast.

Making matters worse, Pesqueira reported that there would be no financing available—either from Banrural (Banco de Crédito Rural, the government's agricultural bank) or from national banks—for the irrigated croplands of Sinaloa and Sonora during the

next 1988 agricultural cycle. Despite this, Pesqueira asserted that there would be no problem of food supply, since "Mexico is prepared for failures."

But Pesqueira is lying. The truth is that a national disaster is in the making, and there are severe food shortages in several regions. For example, residents of the El Carrizo region, located on the border between Sinaloa and Sonora, are already receiving food donations from volunteers in neighboring zones.

In central Mexico, the final kilometers of the Lerma River—just before it empties into Chapala Lake in Jalisco—have already dried out, depriving the region of its sole source of water while the drought lasts. Enrique Flores Tristchler, director of the Astronomy and Meteorological Institute at the University of Guadalajara, Jalisco, reported that Chapala Lake has a capacity of 8 billion cubic meters of water, but that its current volume is barely 3.4 billion cubic meters.

In the state of Puebla, according to statistics from SARH, the drought has already affected 273,232 hectares of primary crops. In Monterrey, Nuevo León, the drought could prevent the sowing of 140,000 hectares of corn and sorghum. In the state of Oaxaca, the state delegate of Banrural declared that 80% of state agriculture is seasonal, and that because of the lack of rain, the number of hectares sown thus far has been "insignificant."

The situation with Mexico's cattle herds is also serious. At least 30,000 head of cattle have reportedly perished in Sonora alone. In the state of

Chihuahua, according to the May 17 edition of the daily *Unomásuno*, the governor and the regional cattlemen's association are asking for permission to export some 100,000 head before they lose their entire herds to the drought. However, they will not be able to export to their traditional markets, the border states of the United States, as 100 counties in southeast Texas have already declared drought emergencies of their own, and cattlemen there are selling off their herds early and at very low prices.

Another serious problem, of course, is potable water for human consumption, which is already being rationed across the nation. In the capital of Chihuahua state, the director of the Water and Health Council, Jesús Roberto Durán, reported that the drought has driven the city into a state of emergency, as all the wells of potable water have begun to dry up.

But the disaster of Mexican agriculture cannot be blamed on the drought, which was just the final straw. The disaster actually began with the National Food Program (PRONAL), formulated in 1983 by then-Budget and Planning Minister Carlos Salinas de Gortari, currently the PRI presidential candidate. PRONAL declared that because of the "economic crisis," resources were simply unavailable for adequate production of such "necessary" but "non-priority" foods as meat, eggs, milk, grains, etc. Some 40% of Mexicans, it concluded, would have to go without. In light of PRONAL's conclusions, price guarantees were eliminated for producers, and the cost of improved seed, fertilizers, and credit shot up.

It remains to be seen whether Mexico's population will again permit the government to abandon it to political exigencies, as it did after the 1985 earthquake.