

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### U.S. mayors report on hunger

*The World Bank calls a conference on hunger, but what about restoring the economy so people can eat?*

**D**uring April, the issue of hunger was the focus of announcements by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Congress, and the World Bank. On April 23, the World Bank announced that it would hold a world conference on hunger. On April 27, Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy announced a series of "issue forums" on hunger, called "Agenda for the Future," to be held around the country, with the first one to be in Washington, D.C. On April 28-29, two House Agriculture Committee subcommittees held hearings on domestic and overseas hunger.

In addition, for three weeks in April, Rep. Tony Hall (D-Ohio), former chairman of the special House Committee on Hunger, which was disbanded with the new Congress, held a hunger strike to call attention to the need to continue that committee.

But there is nothing positive to be expected from the initiative of the World Bank, whose usurious financial and anti-development policies are the principal causes of food shortages worldwide. Similarly, Hall, though he speaks of feeding the hungry, has allied himself with the World Bank initiative. In an April 26 press release, Hall praised the bank's conference proposal as "a major anti-hunger initiative." The international conference summit, he said, "will be in North America and will include international institutions and non-governmental organizations, policymakers, and other interested parties."

What is required instead is action by Congress and the Clinton administration to rescue the economy so that people can afford to eat.

The U.S. hunger crisis was the focus of an April 28 hearing held by the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Department (USDA) Operations and Nutrition. Mayor Patricia Ticer of Alexandria, Virginia testified on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Mayors on the worsening situation in U.S. cities.

Mayor Ticer told the committee, "Clearly, hunger remains a serious and growing problem in America—one which we have the ability to solve. We just have not demonstrated the will." She called for the passage of the Mickey Leland Act, which is currently before the committee, and which mandates higher benefits for the poor. Her testimony presented a sweeping picture of privation in the cities.

"It was more than 10 years ago that we began seeing the problems of hunger growing in our cities. It began with the long lines of people waiting for surplus cheese and the proliferation of soup kitchens and food pantries. Ever since then the conference has been tracking the problems of hunger in our cities on an annual basis. Requests for emergency food have increased each year between 1985 and 1992 in the cities we survey by at least 18% and by as much as 28%.

"Let me provide you now with some of the details of our most recent survey, which examines the status of hunger in 29 cities in 1992. For those cities we found that:

● Requests for emergency food assistance increased by an average of 18%.

● Requests by families with children increased by 14%, and just over two out of every three people re-

questing emergency food are members of families—children and their parents.

● On average, 21% of the requests for emergency food assistance are estimated to have gone unmet. In more than two out of three of the cities, emergency food assistance facilities may have to turn away people in need because of lack of resources.

● The overall level of resources available to emergency food assistance facilities increased by 6%. Forty-six percent of the cities reported that emergency food assistance facilities are unable to provide adequate quantities of food; 70% said that the food provided is nutritionally balanced.

● In 82% of the cities, emergency food assistance facilities were relied on by families and individuals both in emergencies and as a steady source of food over long periods of time.

● Unemployment and other employment-related problems lead the list of causes of hunger. Other causes frequently identified by the city officials include inadequate public assistance benefit levels, housing costs, the high cost of living, and the economy.

● Nearly 9 out of 10 of the cities expect requests for emergency food to increase this year.

● Improving the economy and creating jobs were identified most frequently as the most important thing the federal government could do to eliminate hunger. Improvements in and increased funding for the food stamp program and increased funding for WIC [Women, Infants, and Children Program] were also cited.

... Half of all food stamp recipients are children. Ninety-two percent of all food stamp households have gross incomes equal to or less than the poverty level. They need more help. . . ."