

Farmers Go Hungry as They Produce Food for Export

Due to decades of neglect, poverty and injustice characterize the Mexican countryside.

Vast, rural, agricultural Mexico seems to exist on the fringes of modern Mexico. Its visage of timeless, diverse ethnic features is marked by neglect and injustice. Some of its arable land has been turned into blossoming valleys, while most of it has been eroded by drought and by fire from slash and burn farming; the whole of it is plagued by problems passed on through generations over decades and centuries.

From the point of view of turbulent, modern-day industrial society, the countryside has been regarded as an inexhaustible source of cheap, uprooted labor, willing to leave its ancestral culture behind in exchange for a precarious urban subsistence. For years the countryside has provided the foodstuffs required by industrial expansion. Today, just as the earth resorts to barrenness in response to the irrationality of single-crop agriculture, agricultural output has fallen to such an extent that the country now faces the grave situation of being incapable of feeding itself.

The countryside has fallen way behind the development of the rest of the nation. The development model based on rapid industrialization that as of the 1940s spearheaded economic growth, allowed Mexico to recover strategic industries previously controlled by foreign-owned firms. Likewise, the development of



Cacao beans. Fields are producing less and less

a national consumer market proved essential to economic development. On the social and political level, the shaping of the nation's own institutional fabric guaranteed the possibility of sovereignty and autonomy. Yet Mexican industry and urban life eventually fell out of step with the countryside, which gradually began to slip into backwardness.

Basic health, education and housing services concentrated in the cities. Most of the resources resulting from economic growth were used to further industry, to the detri-

ment of the needs of agriculture. Cities became privileged hubs of wealth and culture and centralized the most important political and administrative decision-making processes. Thus, it can easily be understood why towards the end of the 60s agriculture began to show signs of the stagnation and inflation still present today. In fact, agriculture soon became one of the main structural

level of subsistence agriculture.

The *ejido* was instituted in the late 30s and early 40s during the presidency of General Lázaro Cárdenas, as a form of land ownership that could offset the power of large landowners, break down their holdings and distribute them in a way that would benefit the broader community. Thus, peasant families recov-

problems of Mexico's current economic crisis.

Industrial development also led to a new kind of inequality in the countryside. A capital-intensive sector developed in farming, cattle raising and forestry on the basis of modern technology and irrigation systems, with broad fiscal and financial prerogatives. This sector is in stark contrast to the mass of landless peasants and small landowners whose crops depend on seasonal rains, who lack equipment, machinery and the financing that would allow them to go beyond the

ered a small part of the land that had been wrested from previous generations.

The *ejidos*, set up as a collective form of production based on family property, are undermined by an inefficient and corrupt marketing system. Speculation and hoard cult into the earnings of *ejidatarios*, communal and small landowners who for lack of an adequate marketing system are forced to sell their crops to middlemen.

On the other hand, government-controlled marketing facilities are incapable of pro-

viding adequate profit margins for small farmers. Peasant protests have become widespread in the last few years because of the low price-guarantees offered by official institutions, mainly for corn, sorghum, barley, soy beans, wheat and coffee.

Yet this lack of encouragement toward agricultural production is not limited only to *ejidatarios*, small landowners

These events have led to concerned outcries from peasant organizations, saying they expect an even worse year ahead for the countryside and its inhabitants. The National Union of Fruit and Vegetable Producers (Unión Nacional de Productores de Hortalizas y Frutas) issued a statement to the effect that the agricultural sector cannot be expected to generate a greater contribution when it

The country's current economic woes are considered to be one of the worst crises in our history, yet the peasant population has been living in a similarly critical situation for decades now. Immigration from rural areas to the city has practically become a way of life. On the other hand, the supremacy of powerful regional *caciques* (local political bosses) in the countryside constitutes an-

other serious impediment for the well-being of peasants.

Peasants have ample reason to express their desire for a dignified and just way of life. Not since the large peasant movements of the 1970s, which led to the expropriation and redistribution into *ejidos* of large landholdings in the northern part of the country, has the rural population so continuously and systematically expressed its discontent. In Oaxaca, for example, Indian communities have earned the right to elect their municipal officials according to the region's traditional democratic customs. Peasants in Veracruz, Oaxaca and Chiapas have gone on hunger strikes demanding the suppression of legal shelters that protect large landowners who've pushed out peasant farmers and taken over their plots. Likewise, peasant organizations in Puebla, Veracruz and San Luis Potosí have protested the murders of several of their leaders.

A new factor has appeared on the scene in addition to the ones we have been discussing. The Mexican Confederation of Labor (Confederación de Trabajadores de México), considered to be the strongest organization of its kind in the country, expressed its support for peasants' demands by setting up direct marketing channels between producers and consumers through a network of



A peasant family. A world that is disappearing

and communal farmers. For almost 20 years now public investment in agriculture has had a negative growth rate, meaning that since 1967 the gross agricultural growth rate has been inferior to the growth of the gross national product. The percentage of the national budget assigned to agriculture in 1987 will be 3.99%, while at the same time, the percentage allotted to servicing the foreign debt is 55.1%. Additionally, at the end of last year Congress increased taxes on agricultural production when it approved reforms to the *Ley de Ingresos* (Income and Tax Law.)

is burdened by inflation, a rigid price structure and high production costs. Thus, said the farmers, the sector has been incapable of rendering Mexico self-sufficient in food production.

For its part, the Independent Farm Workers and Peasants' Central (Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos) made public their disagreement with the new indirect taxes being levied on peasants through increased prices and tariffs of goods and services provided by the government.



Two campesinos from the Puebla mountains

Photo by Rafael Bonilla

union outlets and by providing larger incentives for agroindustrial firms managed by workers.

As far back as August 1985, the Confederation had proposed setting up training programs for peasants to improve farming techniques, linking associations of *ejidos* to study and research centers, providing consultancy in management for

facilities and government intervention to put an end to political imposition and repression in *ejidos* and municipalities.

These men and women whose hands are chapped from sun and hard work will never forget that their demands have been ignored despite the fact that they played a decisive role in the 1910 Revolution. Mexico will be unable to



Photo by Rafael Bonilla

Lost illusions for the old folk

cooperatives and *ejidos*, as well as peasant participation in processing, distribution and marketing of their produce.

Labor's proposals are a clear symptom of the social concern over the plight of the peasants, who themselves have demanded that the state take a greater role in dealing with the situation. Peasants are seeking subsidies in the form of agricultural inputs and improved seeds; easily available and greater amounts of credit; cutbacks in the cost of irrigation services; the setting up of state-owned storage and transportation

resolve its crisis as long as there are young men without land or work, or while entire families huddle in Mexico City's railroad station, or as long as crops are lost to the forces of nature, and small farmers and peasants lack credit and government support or are further impoverished by middlemen. The problem is not merely to achieve self-sufficiency in food production. It's also a matter of restoring dignity to agricultural workers, the men and women who are currently living on the fringes of modern Mexico.★

Jorge Luis Sierra Guzmán

Governments Choreograph Dance of Indifference for Central American Migrants

Hundreds of thousands of Central Americans leave their countries to look for work and peace in the north: many remain in Mexico.

Mexico's southern border has its "wetbacks" too —although nobody calls them that— who illegally cross the Suchiate River from Guatemala into Chiapas.

Most of them arrive in Mexico with the intention of reaching the United States, fleeing armed conflicts, military repression and ever-increasing economic stress in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. An estimated two million people have been displaced by the Central American conflicts, and perhaps half a million of these are now living in Mexican territory.

Nonetheless, only 42,000 receive official aid from international organizations and the Mexican government: these are the Guatemalan Indian peasants who fled their country during the military governments headed by General Romeo Lucas (1978-1982) and General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983). Most of these refugees arrived in Mexico between 1981 and 1983. Approximately half of them still live in Chiapas in crowded refugee camps, while the other half have been resettled in the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, in self-sufficiency and immigration projects. This latter group has received the migratory status of "temporary workers," while those still in Chiapas are in the country as "border visitors." In all cases, the children born in Mexican territory are entitled to Mexican citizenship.

Sergio Aguayo, professor and researcher at the Colegio de México's School of International Studies, says there are some 400,000 "forgotten Central Americans" in Mexico. Like the illegal immigrants in the U.S., they are subject to exploitation by employers and extortion by corrupt officials; they have no access to state health facilities and even have difficulties getting the kids enrolled at school, since they often lack the necessary documents. They also risk arrest and deportation; according to Dr. Aguayo, some 40,000 Central Americans were deported through the border crossings over the Suchiate River near Tapachula, Chiapas, in the first ten months of 1986.

The great majority of illegal immigrants in Mexico are from El Salvador, and they do not generally remain in the southern border areas, but move north immediately to try and reach their main objectives: work, dollars and safety from the guns and bombs made in U.S.A.— which make life impossible at home. The interrelationship between the United States and Central America is easily detected by observers. U.S. intervention and military involvement in the area have caused millions of displaced persons to leave their homes. More than one million Salvadorans are now estimated to live in the U.S. For these people, Mexico is but a stepping stone to the "American Dream".