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Starving Central America

The Roots of the Food Crisis

by NICK ALEXANDROV

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“The drought has killed us,” a young Honduran, Olman Funez, explained last summer. He was referring to what the World Bank called “one of the longest droughts in nearly half a century.” A 60-year-old Guatemalan peasant emphasized he had never “seen a crisis like this.” Carlos Román, a Nicaraguan farmer, told a reporter that “there is nothing. We eat what we can find.”

These men are among the 2.8 million Central Americans “struggling to feed themselves” in the region’s “dry corridor”—“a drought-prone area shared by Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua,” according to the UN World Food Programme. The Nicaraguan government described its drought as the worst in 32 years. And last week the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies “said some 571,710 people were affected by the drought in Honduras,” and that “families are selling their belongings and livestock to secure food for survival, while others are migrating to escape the effects of the drought.” But food crises in Honduras and Nicaragua aren’t new phenomena. And in both countries, U.S. policy has helped starve Central Americans.

Consider Honduras, where the Choluteca Department is part of the “dry corridor.” The U.S. Consul in Tegucigalpa wrote in 1904 of Choluteca’s wide “variety of vegetation,” “ranging from the pines and oaks of the highlands to the palm and cocoanut trees along the coast.” These rich

woodlands were devastated seventy years later, declining from 29% to 11% of the census area in the 1960s and '70s. Pastures increased their territorial coverage from 47% to 64% during the same period. "The cattle are eating the forest," Billie R. DeWalt explained in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* three decades ago. The anthropologist Jefferson Boyer concurred, noting that Choluteca's ranchers "simply hired labor to slash and burn the trees and brush, opening the land to grass production."

Honduras was "being converted into a vast pasture for cattle destined for export," DeWalt elaborated—a development in line with Washington's aims. Robert G. Williams noted that Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress boosted Central America's beef-export business," for example, and that "the World Bank, AID, and the IADB" all viewed beef "as a pragmatic, quick way to achieve export-led growth." This beef, DeWalt continued, was "not bound for the estimated 58 percent of Honduran children under five years of age who suffer from identifiable malnutrition," but rather for the U.S.—the source of "insatiable demand for livestock products" and "the largest importer," by a long shot, "of Central American beef export." As U.S. citizens gorge themselves on steaks and hamburgers, "food supplies in poorer countries become scarcer, unemployment increases, and the land and other resources are increasingly degraded." Poor Hondurans thus were forced "to compete with the animals for the locally available resources."

But many peasants, for whatever reason, couldn't accept that they mattered as little as beasts grown for slaughter. They responded to the systematic destruction of their way of life by forming self-defense organizations. Landowners reacted in the predictable manner. "Murders by ranchers were common in the 1960s and early 1970s, and several massacres became public," David Nibert explains. "For instance, in 1975, on a large ranch called Los Horcones"—in the Olancho Department, another site of expanding cattle pastures—"five people were burned to death in a bread oven, two priests were castrated and mutilated, and two women were thrown into a well that was then dynamited. All the victims were connected to a movement organized by subsistence farmers."

Nicaragua's agricultural history was similar, in broad terms. The León Department, now part of the "dry corridor," impressed British trader Orlando W. Roberts, who described it in 1827 as a "well wooded country abounding in game." And U.S. Vice-Consul Peter F. Stout wrote in 1859 that "the fertile plain of Leon" was "covered with forests," its market overflowing with "melons, oranges, limes, lemons, papayas," among the "variety of other edibles" available. But after World War II "the area around León was transformed into a dust bowl as plantation owners cut down forests and expelled tenant farmers and Indian communities from their land," Matilde Zimmerman notes, highlighting the steps taken to facilitate cotton growth. "During the spring dry season, hot winds blew dust into every corner of the city, and the air in León stank of pesticide."

Pesticides helped destroy traditional agriculture in Nicaragua, once the region's breadbasket. "Production of food for domestic consumption declined continuously in Nicaragua from 1948 through 1978 as more and more land was converted to the production of export-only crops such as cotton and cattle or beef," Clifford L. Staten writes of the Somoza era. "By the late 1970s," he continues, "only 13 percent of the active agricultural population had access to land to meet their basic or subsistence-level food requirements." Joseph Collins points out that

Nicaragua's cotton producers, altering the land to promote their interests, "succeeded in turning their country into the pesticide capital of the world. Mother's milk in Nicaragua contained forty-five times the amount of DDT considered tolerable by health authorities."

And Douglas L. Murray stresses that much of Washington's agricultural assistance went towards insecticide purchases. "For example, in the mid-1960s, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) made a \$9 million loan to Nicaragua through the Basic Food Crop Program for the purchase of pesticides for basic grain producers"—though "there was little hope that the chemicals reached the intended recipients," since the money served to "spur Nicaraguan cotton production, as well as generate additional sales for U.S. chemical companies." This corporate windfall was one facet of the cotton boom. Others included "the hardship and suffering of hundreds of thousands" and children's "declining level of caloric consumption," as cotton's expansion "displaced not only basic grain production and subsistence agriculture but also many of the people who had historically lived on the land," Murray concludes.

The agricultural transformations Honduras and Nicaragua underwent—and specifically the forest elimination they entailed—may relate to the region's recent water shortages. Nick Nuttall, an official with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, suggests that "the link between deforestation and drought is very significant," while other researchers believe "drought, amplified by deforestation, was a key factor in the rapid collapse of the Mayan empire around 950 C.E." "I wouldn't argue that deforestation causes drought or that it's entirely responsible for the decline of the Maya," climatologist Ben Cook, a student of that civilization's decay, clarified, "but our results do show that deforestation can bias the climate toward drought and that about half of the dryness in the pre-Colonial period was the result of deforestation."

Now "people and ecosystems" worldwide may share the Mayans' fate, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) fears. In a leaked draft of a report due for official release this Sunday, November 2, the IPCC argues that "even with adaptation, warming by the end of the 21st century will lead to high to very high risk of severe, widespread, and irreversible impacts globally." So we need to decide: either Central America's brutal summer previews our planet's future, or it represents a nightmare we'll narrowly evade.