

‘Worse Than the Special Period’: Cuba’s Food Situation More Desperate by the Day

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Addressing a meeting of government ministers and the press in Havana on Aug. 11, Cuba’s Vice Prime Minister Jorge Luis Tapia Fonseca exploded when discussing the food crisis gripping the nation.

“It takes work to produce food. Everyone wants food deliveries, but we do nothing to produce it. We lack a culture of production ... We don’t need all these papers, or words. When do we begin to plant? Who will do it?”

He was [reporting](#) on implementation of Cuba’s 2022 law on Food Sovereignty and Food and Nutritional Security. He noted that food self-sufficiency in local areas is disastrously lagging. Crop yields are low; plant diseases and the lack of inputs has hampered grain production.

The food situation in Cuba is growing more desperate by the day. Residents of the island individually consumed only 438 grams of animal protein per month in 2022, and in May 2023, only 347 grams; recommendations call for ingestion of 5 kg monthly. Not enough chickens were raised last year; poultry meat and eggs remain scarce.

Yields of corn, soy, sorghum and other crops have dropped, and animal feed is mostly unavailable. Therefore, pork production is also down, milk is unavailable to adults, and fewer cattle are being raised. Pasturage is poor, due to drought and no fertilizer.

Failures Mount

Tapia pointed to the many failures exacerbating the situation. The output of state-controlled food producers is low. Producers, distributors, and institutional consumers don’t regularly contract with one another to facilitate food distribution. Producers aren’t being paid, because credit isn’t available. Cattle-stealing has reached new heights, 44,318 head so far this year.

The Ministry of Finances and Prices [issued a report](#) prior to the National Assembly session that recognized high inflation, widespread popular dissatisfaction, and the need for “concrete solutions.” Minister Vladimir Regueiro Ale indicated prices skyrocketed by 39% during 2022 and 18% more so far in 2023.

Inflation, he explained, varies from province to province and may manifest as abusive price-fixing, especially when agricultural supplies and products are in short supply.

Image is from [World Food Programme](#)



[Commenting](#) on the report, National Assembly President Esteban Lazo, reminded delegates that diminished production and inflation were connected:

“If there is no production and supply, we will not achieve effective control of prices.” He complained that “[practically 100%](#) of the food basket is being imported.”

The Assembly’s Food and Agricultural Commission analyzed organizational and management problems and [reported](#) that only 68% of expected diesel fuel has arrived so far in 2023, 14,700 tons less than in the similar period a year before; 28,900 tons of imported fertilizer were ordered, but only 168 tons arrived. Cuba’s fertilizer production has been nil this year in contrast to 9,600 tons produced in the same months in 2022.

Lazo communicated a message to Cuba’s Minister of Agriculture from the Assembly, whose recent session ended on July 22. The ministry, he said, would be “transforming and strengthening the country’s agricultural production,” to initiate “a political and participatory movement that would unleash a productive revolution in the agricultural sector.”

Nothing Less Than a Revolution Will Do

A revolution appears to be exactly what’s needed. The recent National Assembly session dealt almost entirely with Cuba’s present food disaster. The lives of many Cubans are becoming more precarious due to unending food shortages, high prices, and low incomes.

Information emerging from the Assembly’s deliberations attests to the reality of crisis in Cuba, and it means that urgency is building for Cuba’s friends in the United States to resist U.S. policies in new ways, strongly and assertively. Their own government accounts for new suffering and destitution in Cuba.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel emphasized resistance when [addressing](#) the National Assembly.

He dedicated his remarks to two revolutionary heroes who were present. Admiring how they kept “their foot in the stirrup of difficulties” and their “rifle pointed at mistakes,” he may have been thinking of hard work ahead.

He mentioned “problems of our difficult daily life, such as food production, electricity generation, water availability, crime, rising inflation, abusive prices.”

The president criticized behaviors “that reinforce the omnipresent blockade through inaction, apathy, insensitivity, incapacity, or simple tiredness and lack of faith.”

Díaz-Canel noted approvingly that delegates discussed “closer ties between deputies and the population,” “better management and allocation of the currency,” “greater direct participation of the non-state sector in national production,” “municipal autonomy,” and “downward pressure on prices.”

But it’s not enough. “Above all,” he said, “we must devote ourselves to creating wealth, first of all, by producing food.”

Trouble in the Countryside

Cuba’s rural communities are troubled—and shrinking. Soon, “we won’t have any people left in the countryside,” one delegate said. Another called for improved “roadways, housing, and connectivity.”

Regarding the low level of agricultural skills among the rural population, someone called for teaching in “agroecological techniques” and “good practices for the producing, processing, and commercialization of food.”

The idea has been circulating for a while now that greater local autonomy might help spur food production, but efforts at prompting that devolution of initiative have seen a slow uptake. As of April 2023, aspiring farmers had not yet taken possession of [258,388 hectares](#) of idle land made available to them without cost under land-tenure reforms in 2008.

Frei Betto, Brazilian friend of revolutionary Cuba and adviser to Cuba’s Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Education Plan, visited Cuba in June. In his assessment, the “current shortages are more severe than in the Special Period (1990-95),” when Cuba’s economy nearly collapsed following the withdrawal of Soviet aid and the contraction of trade with the socialist bloc of nations.

[He indicated that](#) Cuba now imports 80% of the food it consumes, up from 70% five or so years ago, and that it costs \$4 billion annually, up from \$2 billion. For corn, soy, and rice alone, the outlay now is [\\$1.5 billion](#) annually.

He indicated, too, that a ton of imported chicken meat now costs \$1.3 million, up from \$900,000 a year ago, that “the wheat supply has worsened,” that milk production is down 38 million liters in one year, and that less oil from Venezuela, thanks to U.S. sanctions there, means further reduced food production in Cuba.

Blame the Blockade, But Not Only

The origins of food shortages in Cuba and the mode of U.S. intervention are highly relevant in understanding the current situation, as every Cuban knows.

To be sure, the shortages plaguing the people are not solely due to U.S. policies. Drought, hurricane damage, marabou shrub infestation, soil erosion, high soil acidity, poor drainage, and lack of organic material soil have all contributed.

The still-prevailing bureaucratic and centralizing tendencies of the Cuban government's economic management also play a role.

The U.S. economic blockade, however, remains central to understanding what's happening. The creation of a food crisis was among the original [proposals](#) put forward by State Department official Lestor Mallory in 1960 for how to overthrow Cuba's revolutionary government. The program: Use "hunger and desperation" to spark the "overthrow of government."

Aid from and trade with the socialist world frustrated U.S. efforts and kept disaster at bay for decades, but eventually the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern Europe fell. The U.S. government seized the moment and passed legislation tightening the economic blockade in 1992 and 1996 and, later, designated Cuba a terrorist-sponsoring nation.

Beyond bans on products manufactured or sold by U.S. companies, proscribed categories soon included products manufactured by foreign companies associated with U.S. ones and products containing 10% or more components of U.S. origin. Now, foreign enterprises active in Cuba faced possible U.S. court action.

International loans and international transactions in dollars are usually off-limits. Payments abroad don't reach destinations. Income from exports doesn't arrive.

Think imports of seeds, fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, breeding stock, veterinary supplies and drugs, new equipment, spare parts, exports of coffee, rum, and nickel. Think loans for purchasing food and more, loans for agricultural development. Think impediments to restoring rural infrastructure.

The blockade, the U.S. tool of choice, has hit food production in Cuba hard. It is far along in achieving its ultimate purpose. Cuba needs a new order of support from friends in the United States—Marti's "belly of the beast."

Cuba Needs Friends More Than Ever

Many have so admired Cuba's brand of socialism as to assume that Cuba's social gains and exuberant international solidarity would fire up such enthusiasm that, along with considerations of fairness, legality, neighborliness, and revulsion against U.S. cruelty, would make U.S. policymakers think anew about Cuba. It never happened.

Now at a watershed moment in Cuba, a new direction is necessary, one all about persuading, organizing, and unifying left-leaning political groups and anti-war, anti-empire activists of all stripes. Leadership is needed.

Frei Betto says that, "It is time for all of us, in solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, to intensify the struggle against the U.S. blockade and mobilize international cooperation with the island that dared to conquer its independence and sovereignty against the most powerful and genocidal empire in the history of mankind."

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