Cuba’s Worsening Food Crisis Means US Blockade Must End Now, Not Later

By: W.T. WHITNEY
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At a meeting in Havana on August 11 attended by government ministers and the press, Cuban National Assembly President Esteban Lazo communicated a message to Cuba’s Minister of Agriculture from the Assembly, whose recent session ended on July 22. The ministry 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.”

The National Assembly dealt primarily with Cuba’s present food disaster. The lives of many Cubans are precarious due to food shortages, high prices, and low income.

Information emerging from the Assembly’s deliberations attests to the reality of crisis in Cuba. Urgency builds 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 while addressing the National Assembly. He dedicated his remarks to two revolutionary heroes who were present. Admiring “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.” He 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.”

“Above all,” he insisted, “we must devote ourselves to creating wealth, first of all, by producing food.”

Vice Prime Minister Jorge Luis Tapia Fonseca reported on implementation of Cuba's 2022 law on Food Sovereignty and Food and Nutritional Security. He noted that food self-sufficiency in local areas was lagging. Crop yields were low. Plant diseases and the lack of inputs hampered grain production.

Cubans individually had 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 been raised; poultry meat and eggs were scarce.

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

Tapia pointed to failures. The output of state-controlled food producers is low. Producers, distributers, 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.

Tapia exploded: "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?"

The Ministry of Finances and Prices issued a report prior to the National Assembly session. It 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.

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 issued one more report. It mentioned 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.

Cuba's rural communities are troubled. Soon "we won't have any people left in the countryside," a delegate said. Another called for improved "roadways, housing, and connectivity." Someone regarding agricultural skills as low called for teaching in "agroecological technics" and "good practices for the producing, processing and commercialization of food."

The idea circulated that local autonomy would spur food production. 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. For him, the "current shortages are more severe than in the Special Period (1990-1995)." He indicated that Cuba now imports 80% of the food it consumes, up from 70% five or so years ago, that it costs $4 billion annually, up from $2 billion. For corn, soy, and rice alone, the outlay now is $1.5 billionannually.

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, that less oil from Venezuela, thanks to U.S. sanctions there, means reduced food production in Cuba.

The origins of food shortages in Cuba and the mode of U.S. intervention are highly relevant. Shortages 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 contributed. Bureaucratic and centralizing tendencies of

Cuba’s government play a role.

The U.S. economic blockade is central. Food crisis is in line with the proposals of State Department official Lestor Mallory in 1960 for policies leading to “hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.” The Soviet Bloc fell three decades later. The U.S. government tightened economic blockade by means of legislation in 1992 and 1996 and, later, Cuba’s designation as 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.”

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.”