

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Beyond Cuajimalpa

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Dear Peter,

Mexican peasant farmers are now harvesting one of their worst corn crops ever. Forty percent of the crop sown was lost due to a severe drought; in some parts of the country, there has been no harvest at all.

Last week, a friend and I went to visit Cuajimalpa, an agricultural town in the south of the state of Mexico. Its streets are made of cobblestone, its buildings of white adobe. The butcher shop and grocery stores filled with people, and the school children clad in bright tartan-plaid uniforms didn't fulfill our expectations of desperate and desolate poverty. And the area just outside the town reminded me of Switzerland in Spring. In the distance stood a chain of grey mountains, and nearby there were undulating fields carpeted with pastel-colored wild flowers.

But five miles outside of Cuajimalpa, we stopped at the home of Dionisio and Joaquina Dominguez. Behind their one-room adobe hut lay twenty dilapidated and rusting cars; selling their parts was one of the ways the Dominguez family supplemented their farm income.

Dionisio, his wife, and most of their eight children were not home. So we talked with their oldest son, Pedro. He is 25 years old, and has never worked anywhere other than on his family's farm. His light-blue, long-sleeved shirt hung outside of his mauve pants with tattered cuffs. His skin was dark, his face round, and his eyes squinty. He wore a bright red baseball cap, and leather sandals. As he spoke to us, he leaned against a small silo made of river reeds woven together with barbed-wire. The silo was less than half full of corn.

I asked him if it had been a bad harvest.

"I'd say that it's the worst that I can remember."

"How much land does your family own?"

"We don't own any land, but we rent two to three hectares* from a man who now is too old to farm. We pay him about 4,500 pesos ** each year to use the land."

"Is that the only major expense you have?"

* One hectare equals 2.2 acres ** Then 70 pesos=US\$1; now 150=US\$1.

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"No, there is also the fertilizer which we bought with a credit from Banrural (the government's rural development bank). This year we bought three tons of fertilizer worth 4,500 pesos. We'll have to pay the credit back in January."

"And how are you going to pay?"

"By selling this corn."

"But then what are you going to eat?"

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it?" he said with a small, rather sad smile. "Come what may, one has to pay for the fertilizer. We'll have to sell at least half our corn to pay for the fertilizer and for next year's rent of the land."

"And is this all the corn you produced this year?" I asked pointing at the family silo.

"Unfortunately yes. It's less than half what we produced last year."

"And how much is it worth?"

"I believe that a ton of corn is now selling at 15,000 pesos. This is a bit more than a ton; it's probably worth about 20,000 pesos. But in difficult times like these, we usually sell some of our animals."



Pedro Dominguez stands by his family corn silo.

"How many animals do you own?"

"We have nine cows."

"And how much could you sell one of them for?"

"Between 18,000 and 25,000 pesos, depending on the animal. For us, our animals are a type of life insurance."

"Will the corn that you don't sell to pay for the fertilizer and rent of the land be enough to sustain your family?"

"With luck, this corn will last us to May. From May until the next harvest in November, we'll have to buy corn. And of course, if we have to sell any of it to buy medicines or other necessities, it won't even get us through the winter."

"Do all eight children work the land with your father?"

they go to school."

"Since this year's crop is so bad, have you considered working elsewhere?"

"Yes. It will be the first time that I will have had to look for work away from home. Before, we always had enough to eat, between what we harvested and the animals that we sold. But not this year. If my younger brothers and sisters are to eat, then I, my brother, and my father must find work."

"And where will you look for work?"

"In Mexico City."

"Do you think that it will be easy to find work there?"

"No. I have friends who regularly work on construction sites in the capital. They have told me that before it was easy to find work, but not any more. They say that now what work they find is usually for a short while - a couple of days, with luck a week."

"Do they say why?"

"They say that there is little construction taking place. Before, even as little as six months ago, it was easy to find work, even in Cuajimalpa. But not any more."

"And if you don't find any work in the capital?"

"Well, that's the catch isn't it? If there's no work there, I'll look elsewhere."

"But where?"

He paused for a second, and stared down towards his sandals. Then, lowering his voice as if to tell me a secret, he replied, "Perhaps to the other side."

"You mean the United States?"

"Yes," he whispered, "that's it."

"Some people say that Mexico's economy is weak right now, and that that's the reason why there is so little work. Do you think that's the case?"

"I don't know. I've never heard that before."

There was another house about fifty feet further down the hill. Even before reaching its barbed-wire fence, we could hear the cackling of the chickens and the snorting of pigs.

"Good afternoon senora, may we enter?" I called from the garden gate.

"Please come in," came the reply from a woman washing laundry near the entrance to her white-washed adobe house. Despite our presence, she continued working at her scrub-board.

"In what way may I serve you?" she asked, addressing us with a large smile. Catalina Nunez Valencia was an extremely young-looking forty-year-old. Her cheek-bones were high, and her skin was a smooth, light brown. Two long braids held back her thick black hair. She had large green eyes, and wore a blue and white checkered apron over her plain yellow shift. Her shoes were made of hard, shiny black plastic; I had only seen such shoes on dolls before. She was shy and often answered my questions without looking up from her washboard. She said that her fifty-one year old husband was in town doing errands. Actually, he was her companero - they had never been married.

"We've heard that much of the harvest was lost in this area."

"There was hardly any harvest at all," she replied, still smiling, but less certainly.

"Is that the corn you harvested?" I asked, pointing down at a wooden corn-bin that resembled an over-sized coffin.

"I'm afraid so. We harvested more than twice that amount the year before. Usually we harvest both to feed and clothe us. This will barely be enough to feed us. This year we can't afford any extra luxuries; not even getting ill."

"How large is your family?"

"We have three children."

"And how old are they?"

"The youngest is two-and-a-half; the others are seven and four years old."

"Is your husband thinking of looking for work in order to make ends meet?"

"Who knows," she said looking up from her washboard for the first time. Her face showed consternation. "I don't know, but I've overheard him discuss such a possibility with his friends."

"But he hasn't discussed it with you?"

"No, no, no!" she replied incredulously, "not with me. He was discussing it with his friends."

"And if he goes to look for work, where do you think he'll go? Mexico City?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever thought of asking him?"

She thought for a moment, never looking up from the dark-green shirt she was scrubbing. Then, she answered, "I'm not the one he talks to about such things."

"How long have you been together?"

"Eight years."

"Do you and your husband own any land?"

"Yes, we have a small piece."

"How large is your plot?"

"I don't know of such things. Only my husband knows for sure. I've heard him say that we have some hectares, but I don't know how big a hectare is, nor how many we have."

"But it is enough to feed and clothe your family in a normal year?"

"When it's a good year, yes. But last year, for example, also was not a good year for us. Many insects attacked our corn crop."

"So what did you do to adjust?"

"We just ate less, and didn't buy much clothing."

"And two years ago?"

"Two years ago, we had a good harvest."

"Did your husband use fertilizer this year?"

"Yes."

"Did he buy it with credit?"

"No, he paid cash."

"And did he have to pay rent for the land?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how much?"

"No. Only the men know such things."

"So the land that your husband uses is not really his, but rented land?"

"That's right."

"And what does your family eat in a given week?"

"Usually we eat whatever is available, usually that's tortillas, beans, and potatoes. Sometimes we also have eggs, and soups made from packages. And in good times, we have meat once a week."

"And in not so good times?"

"Perhaps once a month."

"Do you own any animals?"

"A few chickens."

"And cows?"

"Just a few."

"Two or three?"

"No, ten, but only three are full grown; the rest are calfs."

"Do you ever slaughter the animals for your own consumption?"

"No, they are only for selling."

"Do you make cheese from their milk?"

"No, because there is no milk. Because of the drought, there is no water in the animals' watering hole. When there is no water, they don't produce milk."

"If things got bad enough, if you had several years in a row of bad crops, do you think you'd move your family to the city?"

"No, I think we will always live here."

"What do you think of the new president, Miguel de la Madrid?"

"I wouldn't know. I rarely leave my home, and don't know anything about him."

"What will you do this year for Christmas?"

"Usually we have a fiesta, but this year, I doubt we will. In those houses," she said pointing at a cluster of small adobe houses further down the hill, "live the brothers of my husband. And in that one at the very bottom, lives his mother. That's the house they all grew up in, and that's the house where we all go for our Christmas fiesta. It is always a simple affair. We have punch, and some cakes, and the children get a few toys...But who knows what we'll do this year?"

"And the man who lives in that house?" I asked pointing up at the house we had just left, "is he also a brother of your husband?"

"No, he is just a friend. But he's lived there so long that for us, he is also family."

"Thank you very much for your hospitality, and we hope that next year's harvest is better."

"You're welcome. I also hope the next harvest is better, and if it isn't, well that's life. It's up to God to decide."

We drove another two miles. The road wound around the small hills that dotted the valley. The sky was a deep blue, the sun warm, and the air filled with the smell of dry grass. The fields were covered with stunted corn stalks.

Coming around the edge of one hill, off to our right I spotted a house on the top of a steep-sided knoll. We parked the car. To reach the adobe home, we walked through the family's corn patch, past grazing cows and a small herd of goats, and around a small fenced-in chicken coop. The house belonged to Celina Aguirre Arellano and her companero, Rocoro Sanchez al Pizar. It measured ten feet by fifteen feet, and was divided into three rooms: the bedroom, the kitchen, and the porch. The porch furniture consisted of two metal folding chairs, and a single, small wooden table. The upper, right-hand corner of the back wall was covered with snapshots of friends and relatives. There were no knick-knacks or decorations of any kind.

When we arrived, a yellow, plastic radio was blaring Mexican country music, and Senor Sanchez al Pizar was away working as a farmhand. His wife, a four-foot-tall emaciated woman in a dirty, pink print dress, coughed continuously as she welcomed us. Her many

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wrinkles, and down-turned mouth made her look older than her forty-two years. I asked her about the year's harvest.

"Well, just look for yourself. Look at the corn we harvested; that's it, that's all of it!" she said with disgust.

The pile of dried corn cobs heaped on the left side of the porch couldn't have weighed more than one hundred pounds; without the cobs, it probably represented less than forty pounds of grain.

"And how does that compare with last year's harvest?"

"Last year, we harvested twenty cargas; what you see there is not even one."

"And you lost so much because of the drought?"

"Because of the drought, and because of the mitzicuil - we were absolutely plagued with them this year!"

"Is this the first year that you've had trouble with this insect?"

"No, it has attacked every year for the past three years. But before it only damaged a small part of the crop; this year, it destroyed what little was left after the drought," she said, turning aside in a long spasm of coughing. "The mitzicuil is a horrible pest. It's not like the lobster bug; that only eats the leaves of the corn plant. This insect, however, begins with the roots of the plant, and then goes on to eat everything else."

"How many children do you have, senora?"

"I had twelve, but two died. The oldest two are now married. The other eight live here with me and my husband. The oldest boy who lives with us is eighteen-years-old. This one-" she said, pointing at a listless, small, dark-skinned boy, "is fifteen years old. There's another one who is eleven...No, that's not right." she said, her face screwed up in concentration. "He's thirteen years old. Then, there's a girl who is studying, she's twelve; another who is eight, and finally this one. She'll turn one-year-old next week." And with that, she picked up the infant girl. She was wearing a tattered light-blue dress.

"And besides his own plot, where else does your husband work?"

"Wherever he can find it. Usually he works as a farmhand, or as a construction worker. But really, he'll do just about anything. I mean, really, what choice do we have? We hardly have any corn, or anything else for that matter."

For a moment, she stood there, silently gazing into the distance.

"One of my daughters has gone off to work. This girl also wants to look for work," she said, laying her hand on the shoulder of a girl grinding corn meal. "And since there is no high school here, only elementary school, I see no reason to make her stay at home. As it is, we don't have enough food for the eight of us."

"So where will she go to look for work?"

"To Mexico City. That's where the older one went, and so will this one."

"And will your husband also go there to look for work?"

"No, at least not for a few months. For a few months, he'll be working on a local construction job."

"How much will they pay him?"

"In these parts, people are poorly paid. They can earn as much as 500 pesos a day, but usually they are paid only 300 pesos. It's really very little, given how expensive everything has become. Even the bus fares to Cuajimalpa have gone up. Only a year ago, it cost 5 pesos to go to town. Now it costs 20 pesos, and they say it's going to go to 30 pesos. At that price, I can barely afford to go

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to market."

"And for how long will this corn feed your family?"

"Oh, perhaps a month. You must remember, of course, that it's not only used to feed the family, but also our chickens and pigs."

"What do you ordinarily eat?"

"Beans, just beans and tortillas. Why should I deceive you saying otherwise? We don't have the money to afford much else."

"At least you have chickens, so you must have eggs."

"Sometimes they lay eggs. When we can, we also buy potatoes, and instant soup powders."

"Do you have any cows?"

"Yes, two of those cows grazing over there are ours. The rest belong to other people. Since we don't own this land - I think it belongs to the government - other people also graze their animals here."

"And goats?"

"Yes, we have about ten goats, and take care of another ten goats for some friends. Then we keep every other kid that is born. That is how our friends pay us for minding their animals."

"And do you ever eat them?"

"No, we sell them, always."

"How much do you sell them for?"

"I don't remember. We haven't sold one for at least a year. Papa," she said, affectionately addressing her fifteen-year old son, "how much are goats selling for these days?"

The boy had been sitting on one of the metal folding-chairs, staring down at his shoes. And he kept staring at them as he replied, "twenty-five hundred pesos."

"Is that all?" his mother asked in disbelief, "And what about the cows?"

"It depends upon the animal, but papa has usually been able to sell ours for between eighteen and twenty thousand pesos."

"Do you plan to sell any of this corn?" I asked.

"No, we'll eat it all, and then have to buy more. My husband works so that we can buy corn. I need corn to make tortillas because my children need to eat, they must eat regardless of whether the harvest is good or bad."

"Do you have any pictures of your husband?"

"I have this picture. This was taken when he was imprisoned."

"Why was he imprisoned?"

"It was a mistake. They thought he had killed somebody, but he hadn't. When they finally brought him to trial, they realized he was innocent, and let him go."

"How long was he imprisoned?"

"Eight years."

"You mean he was imprisoned for eight years while awaiting trial?"

"That's right."

"What did you do while he was imprisoned?"

"I visited him often and I worked. Sometimes I cleaned houses; other times, I washed and ironed clothing. Often, I sold tortillas."

"How old were your children when they died?"

"One died when she was born; the other, when she was eleven years old."

"How many years ago did the eleven-year-old die?"

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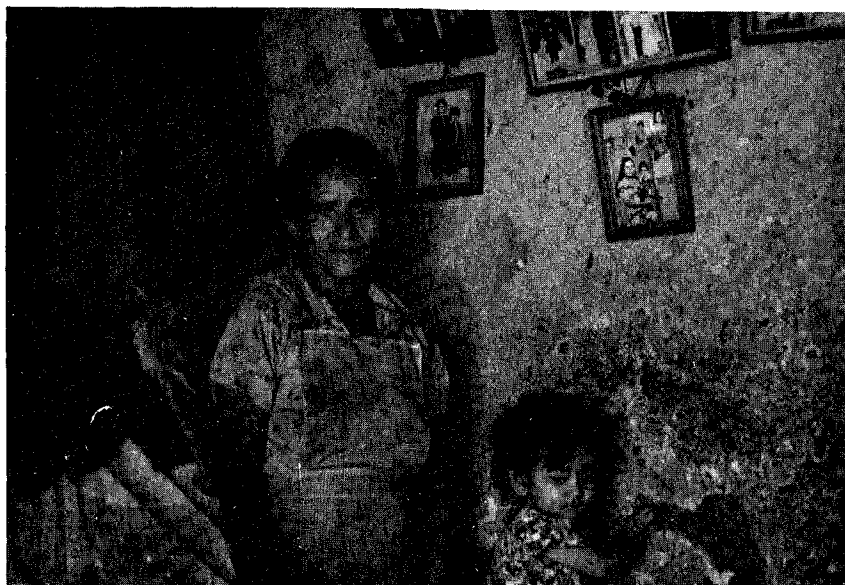
"In March, it will be eleven years ago." She was hit by another coughing fit. It lasted at least two minutes. "It's nothing," she said, "just a cold I've had for many months, and can't seem to get over."

"And what did your daughter die from?"

"Sickness."

"What kind of sickness?"

"She just kept getting sicker and sicker, thinner and thinner. We don't really know what she died from. We couldn't afford a doctor."



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