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In Northeastern Brazil, A Long Cycle of Misery

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ernment plans to hand out subsistence plots to the landless have faltered.

"You can't talk about land reform," José Alcântara, a wiry farmer, explained after earning the equivalent of \$1.25 for a day's work in the cane fields. "Talk about land reform can get you killed. The sugar mill owners don't want to hear anything about it."

The latest food crisis has hit hardest in this fertile area around this town south of Recife, the Pernambuco state capital, because a partial drought last year reduced the sugar harvest and put cane cutters out of work two months earlier than usual. With no other means of sustenance, they must now depend on handouts for their survival.

For the Landless, Bare Subsistence

But in the semi-arid hinterlands known as the "sertão," where the poorer-quality soil is now camouflaged by a carpet of green, there is also hunger because most peasant farmers lack land on which to plant their subsistence crops. And when a plot can be rented, half the produce goes to the landowner.

Even in coastal cities, where grim slums have been swollen by a steady exodus from the interior, widespread malnutrition is now being aggravated by rocketing inflation.

"Most children only come to school because we give them a snack of biscuits, eggs and milk," said Edna Freitas da Silva, who runs a state primary school in Fortaleza. "When we have no food, attendance drops to less than half."

Cultivation of staple foods, though, has never been treated as a priority in this region. Rather, the military regime that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985 sought to bring industry to the main coastal cities of the northeast through a generous system of tax deductions and subsidized credits that has attracted many new factories to the outskirts of Recife and Fortaleza. Their impact on unemployment, though, has been small.

And since the incentives were introduced more than 25 years ago, they have spawned enormous corruption, with the expensive high-rise apartments and office blocks that line the shores of many cities now seen as monuments to what became known cynically as "the drought industry."

Spending Billions With Little Success

Agricultural incentives fared even worse because they were channeled through political bosses who control the interior. Thus, they benefited large landowners who used public funds to build reservoirs and irrigation canals on their own estates and even to speculate on financial markets.

"As a result, although billions of dollars have been spent on the region in recent years, living standards here remain among the worst in Latin America."

"The misery of the northeast feeds the poverty of the rest of Brazil," said Gov. Tasso Jereissati of Ceará state. "This is why it is a national and not just a regional problem."

Certainly, the 18 million northeasterners who left the region in the 1960's and the 24 million who followed them in the 1970's largely explain the chaotic growth of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília and other cities to the south. Yet even now, while accounting for only 15 percent of Brazil's Gross Domestic Product, the northeast still has 30 percent of the population.

In every social indicator, the northeast compares poorly with Brazil as a whole. It has a 45 percent illiteracy rate against a national average of 25 percent. Infant mortality is 125 deaths for 1,000 children born, against 80 for 1,000 nationally. And life expectancy is 51 years, against 60 for all

of Brazil. When contrasted with the developed south, the social gap is even wider.

The end of the military regime in 1985, however, created an opportunity for change, above all since a politician from the northeastern state of Maranhão, José Sarney, became Brazil's first civilian President since 1964. But, with annual inflation now exceeding 500 percent, the Federal Government has been forced to cut back its spending.

"I went to Brasília to discuss a new welfare program," recalled a Ceará state official, "and found it only had money for publicity."

At first, the President also recognized the need for land redistribution in a region where 57 percent of the population still lives in the countryside, where 224 large farms control more land than 1.7 million small producers, and where 2 million peasants own no land at all. But resistance by powerful landowners has paralyzed the program.

In fact, with the northeast now having to import 70 percent of its food from the rest of Brazil, officials say that the situation in the countryside is steadily deteriorating, with land more concentrated in fewer hands than 20 years ago.

"There has been a gradual disintegration of a rural structure that once brought a certain stability," Governor Jereissati said.

The Breakdown Of a Feudal System

Although the northeast prospered from sugar in the 16th and 17th centuries, it remained trapped in a feudal era after mining, coffee and industry began modernizing the center and south of Brazil after the 18th century. Even the abolition of slavery in 1888 had little impact here because former slaves continued living and working on large sugar plantations much as they had done before.

Compared to the day-laborers in this region today, though, these "moradores," as those who remained on the plantations were known, were relatively well off. Their minimal income was spent in the farm supply store, but they were given a small plot on which to grow corn and beans. In the paternalistic tradition of a slave society, many landowners also provided them with basic health care.

In the 1970's, though, this system began to break down after new laws required farm workers to be paid the legal minimum wage and new subsidies stimulated sugar production. To escape the wage law and to plant sugar cane on all available land, plantation owners started expelling "moradores" from their estates.

The resulting social convulsion, above all in this coastal area, accelerated migration to larger cities and stripped peasants of all protection. Forced to live in mud huts on the outskirts of small towns like Ribeirão, they now gather before dawn every morning on nearby highways in the hope of being picked up by trucks to work in the cane fields.

"When I was a morador, I never worried about hunger," recalled José Alves de Oliveira, a 39-year-old Rural Workers' Union official. "I even had surplus food to sell in the market. Now you either work or you starve, which is why our annual strike for higher wages never lasts more than two or three days."

At Year's End: No Food and in Debt

Officials say that, because of the land tenure system, poverty is more extreme in this rain-fed area than in the semi-arid "sertão" to the west. But in the "sertão," which was hit by a prolonged drought between 1979 and 1983, greater access to water also depends on land distribution because most dams are to be found on private property.

Therefore, to survive, the landless rent plots. "You have to give 50 percent of the crop to the landowner as rent," José Ayrton Vieira, a local union official at Quixeramobim in the



Peasants' housing, at top, in Ribeirão, in Brazil's northeast, is modeled after homes once built for slaves. Severina Arruda Dos Santos, left, and her children must live on an income of the eq \$1.25 a day. José Alcântara, at right, a da said land reform is a dangerous subject in t

"sertão" of Ceará, explained. "But you also have to cover bills for food and other supplies. At the end of the season, you're often still in debt and you have no food stocked at home."

Where Begging Pays More Than Work

Landowners, in contrast, blame the Government for the exodus of peasants from the region. "It should do more to keep people here because, when we need them at harvest time, we can't find them," said José Carneiro, who owns six large farms in the area of Quixeramobim. "If the Government gives away food and milk in the cities, people will never want to work."

The Government's emergency public works projects, which in 1983 involved over three million people, are in fact aimed at slowing migration. Yet, even living in the sordid slums of, say, Fortaleza, most people consider themselves better off than in the "sertão."

"A migrant may earn more in one day begging at a traffic light than he would in a month in the interior," said Tarcisio Nogueira, a welfare officer in Ceará state. "His kids may also go to school and there'll be a hospital nearby. That's why he'll never go back."

The Governor of Pernambuco state, Miguel Arraes, who held the same post 25 years ago, even believes that urban poverty is now his main problem. "Expulsion from the land has resulted in a savage, violent and disorderly urbanization," he said of Recife, where more than half the 2.5 million inhabitants live in shantytowns. "No government can handle this."

With neither the economic resources to deal with their social problems nor the political strength to confront local elites, the governors of the northeastern states therefore spend a good deal of time in Brasília begging for help. Amid Brazil's worst economic crisis in decades, however, the chronic poverty of the northeast has failed to rate as a priority.