

Letter to the Editor

[William Paddock wrote an essay for our Malthus issue on the importance of climate as we discuss population growth and food production. He mentioned his long association with the Zamorano agricultural college in Honduras. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, The Social Contract asked Dr. Paddock to give our readers an update on the situation in that country.]

Dear Editor:

Since Mitch my e-mail has been busy. Correspondents are asking, "How fared the agricultural college" of which I wrote in the Malthus Bicentennial issue of *The Social Contract*, "Malthus — Right or Wrong?" (Vol.VIII, No. 3, p.197). The good news is it suffered little apparent damage. Its six-square-mile campus lies in a gently sloping Honduran valley and its cut stone buildings are as solid as Gibraltar. The bad news is its labor force, living in the adjacent hills in the village of Jicarito, suffered terribly. Zamorano's board is considering taking a million dollars from the school's endowment in order to repair the destroyed homes.

Other e-mail labeled Mitch just another wake-up call for the tropics to do something about its population growth since the area suffers from a whole range of unsolvable problems. True. *The New York Times* quoted a Nicaraguan victim, "In the last twenty-five years I have gone through a volcano eruption, floods, earthquake, two civil wars, and now Mitch. Has God no mercy?"

At a dinner party last week (I write this from Guatemala) I heard countless tragic stories about Mitch. One person, a car dealer, had just off-loaded from Japan 156 cars and, before they could be moved from the dock area, they were flooded with ten feet of water. All spoke of landslides or flooded homes, missing bridges, no potable water, flooded fields. One described watching a 55 gallon drum fill with rain water in an hour (could it be possible?). The hostess complained of lack of vegetables for dinner. But no one mentioned the country's greatest loss — the leaching, flooding away forever, of soil nutrients. The best guess is that all of Central America, except Costa Rica, received an average of 2 feet of rain in a three-day period.

No, God doesn't seem to have much mercy for those tropical countries with one resource — agriculture. Most such countries are mono-cultural, at least as far as

their export earnings. In the case of Honduras bananas are the number one export and the plantations were totally destroyed while the coffee harvest, the second largest export, was largely destroyed. It will be three years before there is a banana crop and two for a significant coffee crop. Thus, for the next two years Honduras will live off a dole (foreign aid, World Bank loans, etc.). After Mitch, Carlos Flores, the Honduran president asked that the nation's foreign debt be canceled, saying, "If we cannot pay for even the most basic things now, we can hardly pay on a debt that has been *unpayable from the beginning.*" (Italics mine)

One might believe that Honduras is poor because every time it gets on its feet, something like Mitch comes along and knocks it back down. But natural disasters are only part of the problem. Perhaps a bigger problem is that Central American doers are no longer farm-oriented and place too many priorities ahead of agriculture. The same applies to the whole world which no longer has any movers and shakers who think like farmers. Thus, the president of Honduras at this moment should be more concerned over the loss of soil nutrients and pleading for massive donations of fertilizer (of which his country produces none) rather than debt relief.

The truth is that even after fifty years trying and billions in foreign aid, no one has learned how to overcome the limitations climate places on the tropics — certainly not enough to compensate for its uncontrolled population growth. And worse, we don't *know* we don't know. We no longer have technicians with farm experience who can tell us. President Jack Kennedy replaced U.S. foreign aid field technicians with loan officers and the learning stopped. In the words of Wolfgang Sachs, "The idea of development today stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape, its shadow obscures our vision." Blind faith, rather than factual evidence of progress, is the lubricant that keeps the foreign aid flowing to the tropics, to Somalia, Haiti, Honduras, etc., etc.

Central America has \$14 billion in foreign debt. We might as well garner a little good will and write it off now rather than later. Further evidence of the poverty resulting from agriculture's inability to satisfy the needs of the expanding population of the tropics is found in civil unrest and in massive emigration to the temperate zone.

Global warming assures another Mitch. When it or some other catastrophe causes another short fall in

agricultural production, it is not unreasonable to expect that the area's fragile stability will collapse into some form of anarchy.

For example, the Guatemalan government has taken steps to which the local press responded under the heading: "Hurricane Fallout — Constitutional Guarantees Swept Away by Mitch."

The constitutions of Central American governments all have a section commonly referred to as "guarantees" which are the equivalent of the U.S. Bill of Rights. In times of stress it is not unusual to have the "guarantees removed." As a result of Mitch, the Guatemalan government recently declared a "State of Emergency" which removes the citizens' guarantees of freedom of movement and of legal procedure before any arrest. They will remain suspended until the first of the year. Until then the government authorities can restrict the movement of citizens, prevent them from changing homes, expel whomever the authorities choose from the country and also decide who can hold a passport and enter or leave. In addition security forces do not need a judicial order to arrest someone. Already, because of Mitch, similar "guarantees" have been suspended in Honduras.

The decline of government into anarchy usually takes the following steps: civil unrest can require even the most open democracy to restrict freedoms; if further repression (removal of "guarantees") is instituted, dictatorial powers result; if things worsen further, even repression cannot maintain order and anarchy results. This is not to suggest that this will be inevitable in Guatemala and Honduras but to indicate how easy it is for countries with a short history of democracy to move from one step to the next.

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