

THE SERIOUS FOOD CRISIS

Just 11 days ago, on January 19, in a reflection titled "The Time has Come to Do Something," I wrote:

"The worst is that to a large degree the solutions shall depend upon the richest and most developed countries, the countries that shall reach a situation which they are really in no condition to face unless the world they have been trying to mould..."

"I am not speaking about wars, whose risks and consequences have been transmitted by wise and brilliant people, including many Americans."

"I am referring to the food crisis originating in the economic facts and the climatic changes that are apparently now irreversible as a consequence of the actions of man, but which, at any rate, human minds are under the obligation to face in a hurry."

"The problems have suddenly taken shape now, through the phenomena that are being repeated on every continent: heat waves, forest fires, losses of harvests in Russia, with many victims; climate changes in China, excessive rainfalls or droughts, progressive losses of water reserves in the Himalayas threatening India, China, Pakistan and other countries; excessive rainfall in Australia that have flooded almost a million square kilometers; unusually harsh and unseasonable cold waves in Europe that have considerable impact on agriculture; droughts in Canada; unusual cold waves there and in the US."

I also mentioned the unprecedented rains in Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil.

In that Reflection I informed that "productions of wheat, soy, corn, rice and other numerous grains and legumes that make up the food base of the world – whose population today according to calculations totals almost 6.9 billion inhabitants, now coming close to the new figure of 7 billion, and where more than one billion are suffering from hunger and malnutrition – are being seriously affected by climate changes, creating a very serious problem in the world."

On Saturday, January 29 the daily Internet news bulletin that I receive reproduced an article by Lester R. Brown, which was posted on "Via Organica" Website, dated January 10 and whose content, in my view, must be widely spread.

The author is the most prestigious and prize-winning US ecologist, who has been warning about the dangerous effect of the growing and huge volume of CO₂ being pumped into the atmosphere. I will take only some paragraphs from his well-documented article that coherently explain his viewpoints:

"As the new year begins, the price of wheat is setting an all-time high..."

"...the world population has nearly doubled since 1970; we are still adding 80 million people each year. Tonight, there will be 219,000 additional mouths to feed at the dinner table, and many of them will be greeted with empty plates. Another 219,000 will join us tomorrow night. At some point, this relentless growth begins to tax both the skills of farmers and the limits of the earth's land and water resources.

"The rise in meat, milk, and egg consumption in fast-growing developing countries has no precedent.

In the United States, which harvested 416 million tons of grain in 2009, 119 million tons went to ethanol distilleries to produce fuel for cars. That's enough to feed 350 million people for a year. The massive U.S. investment in ethanol distilleries sets the stage for direct competition between cars and people for

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the world grain harvest. In Europe, where much of the auto fleet runs on diesel fuel, there is growing demand for plant-based diesel oil, principally from rapeseed and palm oil. This demand for oil-bearing crops is not only reducing the land available to produce food crops in Europe, it is also driving the clearing of rainforests in Indonesia and Malaysia for palm oil plantations.

“...a doubling in the annual growth in world grain consumption from an average of 21 million tons per year in 1990-2005 to 41 million tons per year in 2005-2010. Most of this huge jump is attributable to the orgy of investment in ethanol distilleries in the United States in 2006-2008.”

“While the annual demand growth for grain was doubling, new constraints were emerging on the supply side, even as longstanding ones such as soil erosion intensified. An estimated one third of the world's cropland is losing topsoil faster than new soil is forming through natural processes—and thus is losing its inherent productivity. Two huge dust bowls are forming, one across northwest China, western Mongolia, and central Asia; the other in central Africa. Each of these dwarfs the U.S. dust bowl of the 1930s.

“Satellite images show a steady flow of dust storms leaving these regions, each one typically carrying millions of tons of precious topsoil.

“Meanwhile aquifer depletion is fast shrinking the amount of irrigated area in many parts of the world; this relatively recent phenomenon is driven by the large-scale use of mechanical pumps to exploit underground water. Today, half the world's people live in countries where water tables are falling as overpumping depletes aquifers. Once an aquifer is depleted, pumping is necessarily reduced to the rate of recharge unless it is a fossil (nonreplenishable) aquifer, in which case pumping ends altogether. But sooner or later, falling water tables translate into rising food prices.

“Irrigated area is shrinking in the Middle East, notably in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and possibly Yemen. In Saudi Arabia, which was totally dependent on a now-depleted fossil aquifer for its wheat self-sufficiency, production is in a freefall. From 2007 to 2010, Saudi wheat production fell by more than two thirds.

“The Arab Middle East is the first geographic region where spreading water shortages are shrinking the grain harvest. But the really big water deficits are in India, where the World Bank numbers indicate that 175 million people are being fed with grain that is produced by overpumping [...] In the United States, the world's other leading grain producer, irrigated area is shrinking in key agricultural states such as California and Texas.

“The rising temperature is also making it more difficult to expand the world grain harvest fast enough to keep up with the record pace of demand. Crop ecologists have their own rule of thumb: For each 1 degree Celsius rise in temperature above the optimum during the growing season, we can expect a 10 percent decline in grain yields.

“Another emerging trend that threatens food security is the melting of mountain glaciers. This is of particular concern in the Himalayas and on the Tibetan plateau, where the ice melt from glaciers helps sustain not only the major rivers of Asia during the dry season, such as the Indus, Ganges, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow rivers, but also the irrigation systems dependent on these rivers. Without this ice melt, the grain harvest would drop precipitously and prices would rise accordingly.

“And finally, over the longer term, melting ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica, combined with thermal expansion of the oceans, threaten to raise the sea level by up to six feet during this century. Even a three-foot rise would inundate half of the riceland in Bangladesh. It would also put under water much of the Mekong Delta that produces half the rice in Vietnam, the world's number two rice exporter. Altogether there are some 19 other rice-growing river deltas in Asia where harvests would be substantially reduced by a rising sea level.

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"The unrest of these past few weeks is just the beginning. It is no longer conflict between heavily armed superpowers, but rather spreading food shortages and rising food prices—and the political turmoil this would lead to—that threatens our global future. Unless governments quickly redefine security and shift expenditures from military uses to investing in climate change mitigation, water efficiency, soil conservation, and population stabilization, the world will in all likelihood be facing a future with both more climate instability and food price volatility. If business as usual continues, food prices will only trend upward.

The current world order was imposed by the United States at the end of WWII and reserved all the privileges for itself.

Obama has no way to manage the madhouse that they have created. A few days ago, the government crumbled in Tunisia, where the United States had imposed neoliberalism and they were happy for such political exploit. The term democracy had disappeared from the scene. It is incredible to see that now, when the exploited people shed their blood and assault the shops, Washington expresses its happiness for the government fall. Nobody ignores that the United States turned Egypt into its main ally in the Arab world.

A large aircraft carrier and a nuclear submarine, escorted by US and Israeli warships, crossed the Suez Canal towards the Persian Gulf some months ago, while the international press had no access to what was going on there. It was the Arab country that received more war supplies. Millions of Egyptian youths undergo unemployment and the lack of food caused to the world economy, and Washington affirms its support of them. Its Machiavellianism is given by the fact that while it supplied the Egyptian government with weapons, the USAID provided the opposition with funds. Will the United States be able to stop the revolutionary wave that rocks the Third World?

The famous meeting in Davos, which just concluded, became a Tower of Babel, while the richest European states headed by Germany, Britain and France only coincided in their disagreement with the United States.

But there is no need to worry about at all; the US Secretary of State once again promised that the United States would help the reconstruction of Haiti.

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