

Press Release No. 18- Food Monitor Program
Cuba without Milk or Bread

Havana, March 18, 2024

Between February and March of this year, the Cuban government has publicly acknowledged its inability to supply two basic food items: bread and milk.

For over three decades, the state has only guaranteed milk for children under 7 years of age; after which Cuban children lose their right to this dairy product. However, even though the child population in Cuba is increasingly declining due to population aging, emigration, and the deepening of the economic crisis in the country, the supply of infant milk has been delayed and decreased over the last decade and has even been replaced for the 3 to 7-year-old stage by fortified soft drinks or milkshake powder, among other products.

This situation has already reached critical levels, as evidenced by the fact that for the first time, the Cuban government has asked for help from the World Food Programme (WFP) to meet the monthly kilogram of milk for children under 7 years of age sold at a subsidized rate through the supply booklet. However, despite the arrival of 144 tons of skimmed milk powder donated by this international body, this quantity barely covers 6% of the total needed.

Despite the government's discourse since 1959 that the production of milk and dairy products would be abundant, it has declined even further each year. In fact, last February, Cuban government authorities asked livestock farmers to give up the milk to which their children are entitled through the ration store. This request not only evidences the state's inability to guarantee such a basic product; it also destroys the official propaganda about guarantees and social equality for the people on the Island.

Bread, on the other hand, is experiencing a similar situation of reduction both in state-regulated and free-market sales.

Also in February 2024, the Ministry of Food Industry (MINAL) declared the need to reduce bread supply in March due to delays in shipments of wheat and flour. As such, in various provinces of the country, such as Villa Clara and Las Tunas, bread from the ration store is limited to children under 14 years of age and pregnant women, leaving the rest of the population without the right to purchase this food through the supply booklets.

Once again, the government blames the crisis with bread on the U.S. embargo, which "hinders the purchase of wheat on the international market" and its transportation from distant countries. However, this contrasts with the ease with which SMEs import flour from Castile; where the sale price of one kilogram averages 500 CUP—a third of the minimum pension.

Like with milk, the country's food authorities have decided to use substitutes or extenders for wheat flour based on sweet potato, yucca, or pumpkin. This causes the quality of the little bread that can be produced to drastically decrease, forcing the people to consume other ingredients without any choice.

The crisis in the production and supply of these basic food products in any country's diet is clear evidence of the Cuban government's inability to guarantee a minimum food supply, as well as the severe food insecurity that Cubans are facing. The solution offered by the government and MINAL for decades has been to increasingly restrict food supplies.

However, the measures taken by the Government and MINAL lead to a rise in prices both on the black market and in SMEs, where one kilogram of milk can cost as much as a minimum wage. Therefore, the purchasing power, especially of those who barely live on their state salary, decreases day by day in the face of sudden increases in the cost of living in Cuba.

On the other hand, on March 31 of this year, the extension allowed by Resolution 280/2023, which permits the importation of food, personal hygiene products, medicines, and medical supplies without the payment of customs duties, ends. This measure, initially implemented in 2021 after the peaceful protests of July 11th, was used by the Government as a way to alleviate the visible shortage of food and medicines amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The implementation of this resolution and its predecessors (309/2021 and 133/2023) helped to slightly alleviate the lack of food and the economic deterioration in families receiving visits or assistance from abroad. Therefore, eliminating the extension at this time, when the food and economic crisis has deepened even further, would contribute to the rise in food prices and the worsening of the diet of people who, in a way, benefit from this measure.

For these reasons, from the Food Monitor Program, we monitor the existing situation in the country with the aim of analyzing and making known, both to the Cuban and international community, the food insecurity that the Island suffers.

Likewise, we call attention to the increasingly visible inability of the Cuban government to guarantee its population a minimum of food sovereignty and security, violating the human right to dignified and healthy nutrition.

It is also important to highlight how the discourse of the Cuban government authorities continues to hide behind the economic embargo of the United States on the Island without recognizing their own mistakes in economic decision-making, especially in the agri-food sector, to which they barely allocate resources to maintain and develop.

It is also essential that the Government in general and the Ministries in particular issue public records where they transparently disclose the destination of the food donations received from other countries and international organizations; as well as the use of funds that, according to official figures, should be used to buy food, as is the case with the money collected by the telephone company Etecsa, which is supposedly allocated to guarantee milk for children under 7 years of age.