

# Sept. 11 also devastating for world's poor — 10 million more sink into absolute poverty

MATAGALPA, Nicaragua — The morning bus from Managua grinds to a stop as a rope is pulled across the road, blocking its passage. Several hundred people who had been cooking, standing or sitting at the roadside rush to surround the vehicle.

A man in ragged clothing approaches the bus window. He is carrying an empty yellow box, which he presents to the driver.

"Por favor, por favor," the man mumbles, his voice bone-weary. His brown skin is weathered and dirty. The box says in Spanish PLEASE HELP.

The box disappears inside the bus. Thirty seconds later the driver hands it back to the man. It is still empty. The man shuffles off, his shoulders slumped. He hands the box to a woman, who bursts into tears.

The bus continues northward. In its dust the people stand, dazed, and watch it disappear.

## As desperation peaks, aid plummets

These people by the road are refugees fleeing starvation. They were once workers on coffee, bean or corn farms. But a severe drought in Central America, coupled with the lowest coffee prices in decades, have left them with no way to support their families. Lack of rains has led to crop failure and a shortage of seeds.

Desperate to survive, thousands of these farm workers have been deserting their homes in the mountains and settling by the roads to beg for help. Whenever a car or bus approaches, they pull a rope across the road to stop it, hoping this will be the time they get a piece of bread, a little rice, maybe a coin or two for food.

Charities including Food For The Poor Inc., which has provided \$966

million in aid to the poor of the Caribbean and Latin America since its inception in 1982, have been a lifeline for these suffering people.

But since Sept. 11, this lifeline threatens to be cut. Aid flowing to poor nations has slowed to a trickle as Americans, always generous to those in need, redirect their attention and flock to support worthy causes domestically.

This has had a devastating domino effect. According to the World Bank, one of the world's largest sources of development assistance, since Sept. 11 more than 10 million throughout the world have joined the rolls of those surviving on *less than \$1 a day*. This amount is the brutal benchmark that the Bank considers "absolute poverty."

*"I am not sorry I came. At least I have something to offer my children now."*

- Salvadora Mendez

Olga Pineda, one of the drought refugees staying at Matagalpa, knows absolute poverty well. She holds the hand of her 8-year-old daughter, Jacqueline. They are crying. Olga tugs frantically at a stranger, a woman visiting from America.

"Please, *senorita*. Give me something to eat. I just need it for her," she pleads in Spanish, motioning to her daughter, frail and dirty in ragged clothes beside her.

Entire communities of refugees have come together down to these roads. These villagers, from San Ramon in central Nicaragua, and many others have not been paid in six months. At night they sleep on the ground under sheets of plastic held up by sticks. In the day, they wait under these makeshift tents, which are black and scalding to the touch.

Many are thankful to be here, despite the harsh conditions. "I am not sorry I came," declares



Refugee Salvadora Mendez worriedly checks on son Marcos, 2. The little boy is severely malnourished and has pneumonia.

Salvadora Mendez, crouched under plastic with her three young boys. "At least I have something to offer my children now." She holds up a plastic sandwich bag that contains several tablespoons of dry oatmeal. Beside her, her son Marcos, 2, lies motionless, sick with pneumonia, his tummy distended from malnutrition.

## A forgotten crisis

A United Nations (UN) World Food Program study reveals that 1.5 million Central Americans are severely affected by the drought and resulting famine, with 800,000 at high risk for starvation. The UN considers this the most serious emergency to strike Central America since Hurricane Mitch killed more than 9,000 in 1998.

So far at least 10 people have starved to death in Nicaragua. Guatemala, where 41 people have died recently, has been even harder hit. With so many families dependent upon farming to survive, the famine threatens to kill hundreds more, especially vulnerable children and elderly.

Once headline news, the famine has all but disappeared from the top stories lists of most media outlets — leaving hundreds of thousands essentially starving in silence.



Ravenous from hunger, two young famine refugees at Matagalpa, Nicaragua, devour bowls of donated rice — their first meals in two days.