

ADDRESS BY ESTEBAN LAZO HERNANDEZ, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF STATE OF THE REPUBLIC OF CUBA, FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL SUMMIT "SOVEREIGNTY AND FOOD SECURITY: FOOD FOR LIFE", HELD ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 7TH, 2008, IN MANAGUA, NICARAGUA.

Esteemed Comandante Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua,

Distinguished presidents and high representatives,

The facts speak clearly for themselves. In 2005, we used to pay 250 dollars for every ton of rice we imported; now we pay 1,050 dollars, four times as much. For a ton of wheat, we used to pay 132 dollars; now we pay 330 dollars, two and a half times as much. For a ton of corn, we used to pay 82 dollars; now we pay 230 dollars, nearly three times as much. For a ton of powdered milk, we used to pay 2,200 dollars; now it's 4,800 dollars. This is a perverse and unsustainable trend.

This phenomenon undermines the internal markets of most countries in our region and around the world, affecting the population directly, particularly the poorest sectors, bringing poverty to millions of people. A few decades ago, there were countries that grew their own rice and corn. But, following the neo-liberal recipes of the IMF, they liberalized the market and began to import subsidized US and European cereals, eradicating domestic production. With the rise in prices at the pace we've mentioned, a growing number of people can no longer afford to eat these basic food products. It comes as no surprise, thus, that they should resort to protests, that they should take to the streets to find whatever means they can to feed their children.

As Fidel underscored in 1996 during the World Food Summit, "hunger, the inseparable companion of the poor, is born of the unequal distribution of riches and of the world's injustices. The rich do not know hunger". "Millions of people around the world have perished in their struggle against hunger and injustice".

The food crisis we face today is exacerbated by high oil prices and by the impact that the military adventure in Iraq has upon these; by the effect these prices have on the production and transportation of food; by climate change; by the fact that significant volumes of US and EU-grown grains and cereals are destined, more and more, to the production of biofuels and by the speculative practices surrounding transnational big capital, which gambles with food inventories at the cost of hunger for the poor.

But the essence of the crisis is not to be found in these recent phenomena; it lies, rather, in the unequal and unfair distribution of riches at the global level and in the unsustainable neo-liberal economic model that has been imposed upon us in an irresponsible and fanatical fashion over the course of the last twenty years.

Poor countries, dependent on food imports, are in no condition to take the blow. Their populations have no protection whatsoever and the market, needless to say, has neither the capacity nor the sense of responsibility to offer such protection. This is not a strictly economic problem. It is a humanitarian drama of incalculable consequences which even places our countries' very national security at risk.

To attribute the crisis to increased consumption by important sectors in certain developing countries that report accelerated economic growth, such as China and India, is not only an unfounded argument, it also conveys a racist and discriminatory message, which portrays as a problem the fact that millions of human beings should have access, for the first time, to decent and healthy food.

The problem, as it manifests itself in our region, is, in essence, linked to the precarious situation of small farmers and rural populations living in underdeveloped countries, and to the oligopolistic nature of the large transnational companies that control the agricultural food industry.

These companies control prices, technologies, norms, certifications, distribution channels and sources of funding for world food production. They also control transportation, scientific research, genetic pools and the fertilizer and pesticide industries. Their governments, in Europe, North America and other parts of the world, set down the international norms that govern trade in food, technologies and the supplies needed to produce these.

Agricultural subsidies in the United States and the European Union not only make the food these countries sell more expensive, they also constitute a fundamental obstacle for developing countries seeking to access their markets with their products, something which has a direct impact on the situation of agriculture and producers in the South.

This is a structural problem generated by today's international economic order, not a passing crisis that can be alleviated with palliative or emergency measures. The World Bank's recent promises to destine 500 million devalued dollars as an emergency measure to alleviate the crisis are ridiculous and an insult to our intelligence.

To strike at the very heart and at the causes of the dilemma, we must examine and change the written and unwritten rules, both agreed to and imposed upon us, that today govern the international economic order and the creation and distribution of wealth, particularly in the food production and distribution sector.

Today, the truly decisive move is to undertake a profound, structural change of the current international economic and political order, an order which is anti-democratic, unjust, exclusive and unsustainable. An order which is predatory, as a result of which, as Fidel said twelve years ago, "waters are contaminated, the atmosphere is poisoned and nature is destroyed. It is not only the fact that investments, education and technologies are lacking or the population is growing at an accelerated pace; the environment is being degraded and the future is menaced more and more every day".

Having said this, we agree that international cooperation, as a means of confronting this time of crisis, can no longer be postponed. We need emergency measures to quickly alleviate the situation of those countries which already face social turmoil. In the middle term, we must also give impetus to cooperation and exchange plans that entail joint investments and accelerate agricultural production and food distribution in our region, through the firm commitment and resolute participation of the State. Cuba is willing to modestly contribute to efforts of this nature.

The program brought to us today by comrade Daniel, a call to join forces and wills and to combine the resources of ALBA members and countries in Central America and the Caribbean, is worthy of our support. It presupposes the clear understanding that the current food crises the world faces is not an opportunity, as some believe, but a very dangerous crisis. It entails the express recognition that our efforts must be aimed at defending everyone's right to food and at securing a decent life for the millions of peasant families that have been plundered to this day, not at availing ourselves of the occasion to pursue corporate interests or petty commercial opportunities.

We have debated on the matter extensively. Now, it is time to act with unity, audacity, solidarity and a practical spirit. If this is our common goal, you can rely on Cuba.

Allow me to conclude with the farsighted words Fidel pronounced in 1996, which reverberate today with undiminished pertinence and profundity: "The bells that toll today for those who starve to death each day shall toll tomorrow for the whole of humanity if it refuses to or is unable to be sufficiently wise to save itself".

Thank you very much.