

UN warns of surging hunger in Central America

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An elderly woman prays at an improvised altar with the image of the Virgin of Suyapa, patron saint of Honduras. (Photo: AFP)

United Nations, February 24 (RHC)-- The United Nations has warned that hunger levels are soaring across much of Central America as countries battle economic crises sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme climate events.

The UN's World Food Program said that levels of hunger had risen nearly four-fold in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, from 2.2 million people affected in 2018 to nearly eight million now.

Of that figure, some 1.7 million people are considered to be in the "emergency" category of food insecurity, meaning they need urgent food assistance, the World Food Program said, urging more international support.

The UN agency said the region, where years of drought and erratic weather had already disrupted food production, had been especially hard-hit by the record 2020 Atlantic hurricane season. "Hurricanes Eta and Iota, that struck Central America in November 2020, upended the lives of 6.8 million people who lost their homes and livelihoods," WFP pointed out.

The hurricanes came as the pandemic was already taking a devastating toll, and dealt a severe blow to millions who had previously been relatively untouched by hunger, including people working in the service economy and the tourism sector.

Both hurricanes destroyed more than 200,000 hectares of vital crops across the four countries and more than 10,000 hectares of coffee farmland in Honduras and Nicaragua. "Considering the level of destruction and setbacks faced by those affected, we expect this to be a long and slow recovery," said WFP regional chief for Latin America and the Caribbean Miguel Barreto.

WFP appealed to international donors to step up support, saying it needed more than \$47 million to help 2.6 million people across the four countries over the next six months alone.

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