

Indigenous Mexicans battle hunger amid historic drought

Brian Roewe | Jan. 18, 2012 Eco Catholic

Jesuits: Drought causing widespread hunger among Mexico's Tarahumara

By Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY (CNS) -- Jesuits working in Mexico's remote Copper Canyon in Chihuahua state have warned of widespread hunger among the indigenous Tarahumara, who have been negatively impacted by drought conditions considered to be the worst in more than 70 years.

The St. Ignatius of Loyola Foundation began a campaign Jan. 16 to raise money to buy corn, a staple in regional diets and a crop unable to be grown in an area that has received only 25 percent of its normal precipitation in 2011. The foundation estimated that 60,000 Tarahumara were impacted and 90 percent of the local bean crop had failed.

Mexico is experiencing drought in seven northern states, where the federal government says a lack of rain has caused the driest conditions in 71 years and negatively impacted 2.5 million residents.

The drought has hit the Tarahumara especially hard as the indigenous group inhabits an impoverished region of rugged natural beauty in the Sierra Madre that has attracted tourists and adventure seekers, but remains underdeveloped, impoverished and exploited by illegal logging and drug runners in recent decades.

Mexicans responded with generosity and outrage after an erroneous story was broadcast saying the Tarahumara were committing suicide after being unable to find food.

Jesuit Father Javier Avila said the suicide stories were false, but he described the situation as dire.

"The drought this year in the sierra is atypical ... there wasn't rain and now, in the winter, there wasn't snow," Father Avila told Catholic News Service.

He estimated the food produced in the region would run out during February, "When the problem will be worse."

The Jesuits, who have served the Copper Canyon for decades, are working with the Chihuahua business community to deliver relief through its long-established networks.

The federal government said in a Jan. 17 press release it was sending in food and blankets and opening shelters to the area.

Father Avila said the government is welcome to join the relief efforts, but he said of past state efforts: "They'll come in and give things away. We disagree with this because it creates dependence." He added that disaster relief and social programs often are used for partisan political purposes in Mexico.

"We want to create a dialogue, get to know the problems ... to solve them," he said.

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