

Malnutrition Taking Bigger Toll Among Mexican Children

By ALAN RIDING

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MEXICO CITY, March 5—In the Cerro del Judío slum overlooking the capital, Rosario Salinas prepared her children's lunch of beans and lentils. "The last time we had meat was on Christmas Eve," she related. "Before that, who knows? We eat what we can buy."

Outside the tin and hardboard shack built by the Salinas family six years ago, two trucks bounced along an unpaved street to deliver Wonder Bread and soft drinks to a tiny grocery.

"Everything is so expensive these days," Mrs. Salinas said. "What can we do? We used to buy chicken, but that has gone up so much. My husband is not working, so we just tighten our belts. My sister gives me milk some days. Otherwise the children drink corn meal and water."

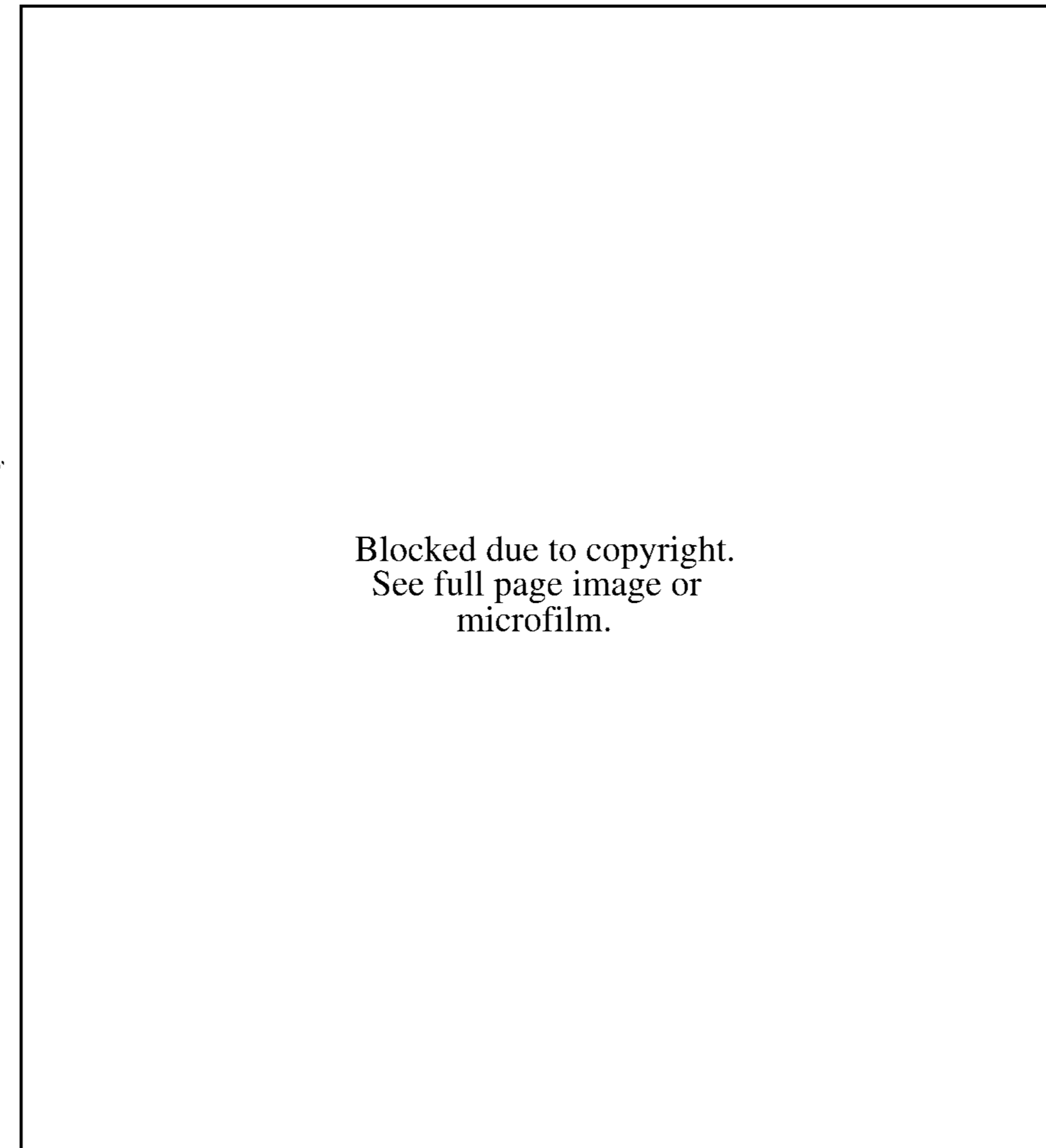
While malnutrition has long been a chronic problem in Mexico, the recession that has gripped the country for four years has brought even more serious undernourishment to millions of families, both in city slums and in villages. Reliable statistics on nutrition levels do not exist, although the 1970 census concluded that 30 percent of the population, then over 60 million, were undernourished, another 30 percent suffered malnutrition and at least 20 percent were obese because of poorly balanced diets.

Food Production Stagnant

Since 1974, though the population has continued growing at over 3 percent a year, food production has been virtually stagnant. Unemployment and underemployment have expanded to include more than half the work force and prices have rushed ahead of wages. For millions all this has meant less to eat:

"The first indicator is when we see infant mortality rising again," said Dr. Adolfo Chávez, head of nutrition in the National Nutrition Institute. "In some really depressed rural communities few children born since 1974 have survived. We have what we call generational holes. But infant mortality is also growing in slum areas of the cities."

Dr. Chávez said that no one died of starvation but that many children succumbed to parasites, diarrhea, measles, whooping cough and other illnesses only because of undernourishment. "More than 100,000 children die here each year



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Rosario Salinas preparing a meal at her home in Cerro del Judío, Mexico

because of the relationship between malnutrition and transmittable diseases," he said, "and of the two million or so who are born each year at least 1.5 million will not adequately develop their mental, physical and social functions."

Export and Industry Are First

The Government recognizes that economic and unemployment problems cannot be resolved overnight, and President José López Portillo is emphasizing increased production of basic foods to establish "minimum levels of life and dignity" for lower income groups. The economic and cultural obstacles to achieving

even this modest objective are enormous, however.

As in many developing countries, agricultural priorities are, first, food for export, second, food for industrial processing and, only third, food for the population at large. While winter vegetables, strawberries, tomatoes and coffee are being produced for export, for example, the Government must import corn and beans. Similarly, according to official figures, more basic grains are consumed for animal forage than by 20 million peasants.

To change this picture the Government must drastically transform the rural economy, not only carrying out its plan to collectivize thousands of tiny uneconomic plots but also switching credit and other support away from lucrative exports to basic food. In this it faces at least one painful dilemma: It wants to hold down the prices of staple foods for the hard-pressed urban poor, but it must increase them to stimulate production and raise the incomes of the rural poor.

Over five years the prices of corn and beans has increased, but more slowly than, say, those of the seed and fertilizer that small farmers need to increase their yields. On the other hand, slum dwellers, finding food prices rising faster than income, have been forced to reduce consumption.

Distribution a Serious Problem

Distribution of available food also remains a serious problem. Although daily intake is 2,600 calories a person, considered a reasonable level, 30 percent of the population consume less than 2,000 calories while 20 percent receive over 3,500. Similarly, while the poor eat mainly corn and beans, the well-fed minority consume processed food equivalent to 12,000 calories in terms of agricultural input.

The Government's basic food corporation, Conasupo, has established a chain of supermarkets and stores around the country, but, significantly, the largest and best-supplied branches are in middle-class urban areas, while in slums and villages consumers are often overcharged by merchants.

In addition, according to nutrition experts, the poor often fail to make the best of the resources available. In the countryside there is little tradition of vegetable consumption, with peasants growing them only for sale to city markets. In slums buying habits have been distorted by advertising so that the poor may buy soft drinks instead of milk.

Ignacia Chávez de Cabrera lives with her five children in Cerro del Judío in a hut with a mud floor. They have a television and a large stereo set. "Neither works," she complained, "but we are still having to pay for them. It was my husband's idea. He was talked into it by the shopkeeper. Now 100 pesos a week go on those things and I do not have enough money for milk."