

## Food Insecurity in Cuba Worsens Amidst Pandemic

September 2020

As the Government of Cuba (GOC) clamps down on Havana following a rebound in COVID-19 cases, long lines and chaotic street scenes show that desperate Cubans are putting their family's nutritional needs ahead of any viral infection concerns. On September 1, the GOC announced it was reinstating a curfew and other restrictions in Havana after a spike in COVID-19 cases. The lockdown corresponds with alarming national shortages of basic goods, including food, hygiene supplies, fuel and cooking gas. Cuban consumers wait in long lines to feed their family, despite fears of contracting the virus, and face a new enemy – inflation - following sharp price increases since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March.



*Police intervene as desperate Cubans fight for food rations*

Cuba is in a precarious political and economic crisis that erodes what little spirit Cubans retain after decades of authoritarian rule. The spread of COVID-19 exacerbates deplorable living conditions caused by entrenched poverty, food insecurity, a lack of medicines and sanitation supplies, a poor secondary health care, overcrowded housing, and growing contempt for government mismanagement and human rights violations. Attempting to maintain order, the GOC is imposing fines for those who do not maintain social distancing, even though survival often means waiting with hundreds of people in long lines to buy scarce goods.

Although economic mismanagement, contraction of medical mission revenues and a collapse in tourism have led to a foreign exchange crisis, the GOC blames food and basic supply shortages on U.S. government sanctions. However, the U.S. remains a major source of food for the island during the pandemic. In the first five months of 2020, the U.S. exported \$81.6 million of chicken meat to Cuba, and in July, poultry imports from the U.S. grew 136 percent over June totals. Ironically, the U.S. is the island's leading provider of chicken meat – the leading source of animal protein to Cubans – as well as soy and corn. The condition for U.S. trade is that Cuba pays cash, which is becoming increasingly difficult given the government's depleted foreign exchange balances.

With the inability to cover all its import needs, GOC rationing means Cubans must spend hours in long lines to have any hope of receiving miniscule quotas of chicken meat and other scarce foods and hygiene supplies. The situation has grown desperate – recent videos from the island document violent arguments, pushing and shoving as Cubans fight for their place in lines in response to rumors of available foods and other supplies. These unruly street scenes conflict with the GOC's portrayal of its efficient handling of COVID-19 prevention measures. Clearly, Cuba is facing challenges not seen since the "Special Period" following the fall of the Soviet Union when the average Cuban lost 25 percent of body weight, and tens of thousands suffered neurological damage from malnutrition. Cuba is at a tipping point, and OAA will continue to monitor and report on the situation as developments occur.



*Hundreds of people stand in line for food daily*