

# Dominican Republic: Poverty and progress

by Gregory Wurzer

With our heads spinning from daily headlines of war and threatening nuclear holocaust, we often forget about the people of the Third World. We forget that they, who have so little, outnumber ourselves, who have so much. We forget that they are the ones who suffer so unjustly in the wars of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and other Latin American countries. We hear about the Third World, and see pictures of naked, starving children with bloated stomachs on television, but quickly turn the channel. We don't like to see those pictures, those naked children. Who would show such things on television while we're eating dinner? After all, the

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Third World is far away, thousands of miles away, too far for us to do anything. It is something we accept. There are poor people, and there are rich. Natural. There always have been poor people, always will be. Just be thankful we live here and not there. That's the way things are.

For the past four years, Scarboro Foreign Missions and Youth Corps (Toronto) have organized and partly sponsored five-week excursions to the Dominican Republic in order to give people an opportunity to observe conditions of a Third World nation first-hand. This year the program sent thirteen participants from all parts of Canada to the Dominican Republic.

The Dominican Republic is situated in the Caribbean, about 500 miles east of Cuba on an island - Hispaniola - shared with Haiti. This Spanish-speaking country has a population of approximately five and a half million people, and Catholicism is the predominant religion. The Catholic Church has a strong history in the Dominican Republic that dates back to the days of Columbus. At different times in history it has been under French and Spanish domination, and today is a victim of foreign economic domination by multinational corporations, particularly those of the United States. It is famous for its ruthless dictator, Trujillo, who took advantage of his position of power and neglected to introduce democracy to the Dominican Republic. Today the Dominican Republic is haunted by Trujillo's bloody regime. Modern-day Dominican government is "democratic," but the military still plays a very influential role.

During our first week in the Dominican Republic the group attended lectures on the history and problems of the country. Each participant then parted ways to live with individual families in different parts of the country.

I lived in a barrio, a slum, on the outskirts of San Pedro de Macoris, a small ocean port on the southeastern shore of the country. Walking into the barrio the first day was the most difficult thing I ever did. I thought I could imagine what poverty was, but nothing came close to what I experience. It really must be seen to be believed - even pictures do not have the same impact. Roads were extremely rocky and uneven, and houses were made of anything from cardboard to thin wooden planks nailed crudely together. Most houses had tin roofs and cement floors, which were always filthy and impossible to keep clean. Houses were the size of a

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living room in a medium-sized Canadian home, facilitating 7 or more family members (many extended families). One or two taps in the whole barrio supplied water, which was stored in large metal drums in the houses. While people themselves were conscious of keeping clean by sponge-bathing regularly, other forms of sanitation were non-existent. Latrines consisted of cement blocks in the ground. Garbage was casually discarded out of doors and windows and left to rot in the sun. Children went naked as wages were low and food or clothing was barely affordable, nor was medicine and medicinal services. Government hospitals provided services in the cities, but in my barrio people didn't seem to be able to afford such services and often relied on home remedies. Diets consisted of beans and rice, with chicken, fish, the odd vegetable, and almost no fruit - surprising for a nation of the Caribbean, but fruit was too expensive. People themselves had little sense of proper nutrition. As a result, disease and malnutrition were rampant. At times it made me sick to watch children wander around with bloated stomachs, or picking infected, open sores. The head of my family was employed at a local sugar factory for six months of the year, and the rest of the time he devoted his time

as a volunteer at a school dedicated to the popular education of workers. Needless to say, his wages were not sufficient to keep his family properly clothed and fed.

The barrios did have electricity. Houses had electric lights, and televisions and radios could be heard blaring everywhere (not loud enough to drown out crowing roosters, however!). It was really strange seeing televisions in households which couldn't afford clothing for their own children. Television programs consisted of news, sports, soap operas (as sappy as our own), and many American shows - American influence through these programs was blatantly obvious, and I couldn't help but wonder what an ideal image many of these people must have of the United States and Canada. Baseball is a very big sport in the Dominican Republic, and young boys often dream of being "discovered" and drafted to the "big leagues" in the United States.

Probably the most rewarding part of the trip was getting to know the people themselves. They were extremely warm and friendly, and their hospitality was overwhelming. It meant a lot to them that we were there, studying their problems, showing concern for their country. I often got the impression that we were their link to the outside world, and that somehow when we got back to Canada we could bring about change. It was frustrating at times explaining to them at times that we really had no

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great political affiliations, and that all we could do was attempt to make other people aware of their problems.

The Dominican Republic suffers from many basic problems. A few facts and statistics will help clarify them:

#### **Malnutrition:**

The Dominican Republic suffers from chronic malnutrition. Food production is the root of this problem. Land which could easily grow vegetables and fruit for more balanced diets is used to raise sugar and coffee for export - by multinationals - people themselves have very little control over the land. Sixty per cent of the land is controlled by 200 people, 30 per cent by 5000 people, and 10 per cent by 3 million people. As a result of this malnutrition, infant mortality is very high. 134 of every 1000 babies born in the Dominican Republic die.

#### **Education:**

About 60 per cent of the Dominican population is illiterate. Any type of schooling is minimal. Students often have to go as far as 5 kilometres to get

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to school (transportation is not always available or efficient). The schools themselves are equipped with the bare essentials, and many are falling apart. Many children must quit school and work in order to supplement family incomes. Two thirds of all school age children have less than grade one. One percent have more than grade nine. Seventy five per cent finish primary school, twenty five per cent finish secondary school, and three percent enter university. The majority of students entering university study education, and as a consequence there are a limited number of people in other professions, like medicine, which are greatly needed.

#### **Working conditions and Income:**

Capitalist countries solve their own economic problems by exploiting the Third World. They pay little for the sugar, coffee, and other cash crops, which are exported. There are 2.5 million workers in the Dominican Republic; of these, 1.3 million are seasonally unemployed, and 1.2 million are underemployed. Underemployment is greater than 50 per cent. And countless jobs are often cancelled in order to pay growing external debts.

62 per cent of families earn less than 200 pesos a month (approximately \$150 Canadian). 30 per cent of families earn less than 60 pesos a month. 41.5 per cent of families earn less than 125 pesos (minimum wage) per month. 75 per cent of campesinos, those workers who work in the country (sugar cane) suffer from malnutrition. Many of us had the opportunity to visit these camps, or bateys, where the cane cutters work. Housing consists of long cement sheds with limited furnishing, and no sanitation or water. Food was to be acquired through wages earned, which were not sufficient to keep families fed. A large proportion of these cane cutters are Haitian, who come to find work in the Dominican Republic because conditions in Haiti are even worse. Many of these Haitian cane cutters are imported by the Dominican government and Gulf and Western a gargantuan American multinational corporation.

Money is actually exchanged between the Dominican and Haitian governments, so it is, in effect, slave labour. Gulf and Western hires more than 15,000 of these Haitian workers. Workers rise at 4 AM and return home at 6 PM with wages that won't feed them. Workers also receive 75 cents a day from the government (what we pay for a cup of coffee) but this does little to alleviate hunger. Studies by the UN have deplored these slave-like conditions, and yet they still persist. Gulf and Western pays its workers cheaply, yet at the same time builds luxurious hotels in the Dominican Republic for tourists, the majority of whom do not realize that these resorts are made possible by the millions who starve. I had the opportunity of visiting one of Gulf and Western's hotels, and was overwhelmed by its poshness (after living in a barrio for two weeks I experienced reverse culture shock). As I ate lunch in the hotel's lavish restaurant and surveyed the richly dressed tourists around me, I wondered if any of them knew of the "other side" of the Dominican Republic, of the poverty. It was also interesting to note that this resort was secluded from the "eyesores" of poverty. It was appalling. It was sickening.

Sugar unions and other workers' unions are working in the Dominican Republic to raise workers' awareness of this exploitation and injustice which they suffer. Those who rebel against the system are arrested and sometimes beaten by the National Guard. It is only a matter of time before these unions organize themselves and confront the government and the multinationals in an effective manner.

#### **Multinationals:**

Gulf and Western and Falconbridge, a nickel-mining company originating in Canada with operations in Sudbury (today the US holds the majority of Falconbridge shares) are the two major multinational corporations operating in the Dominican Republic. Multinationals in this area of the world are raping these nations of their resources and wealth. Reagan himself had a distinct economic policy for the region of the Caribbean and Central

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America. Its goals are chilling. It is clear that the very lives of the people are being sacrificed for economic gain. The United States and other First World nations take advantage of weaker economies in the Third World. Reagan's plan has three basic goals: aid propositions for certain countries, the liberalization of international commerce, and the facilitation of US investment in these countries. Consequences of Reagan's plan are increased exports, monopolized commerce, and increased American control. American multinationals benefit through increased guarantees, more tax exemptions, and greater profits.

The IMF helps many of these nations, but rising inflation rates make repayment of external debts virtually impossible. Many workers must be fired in order to pay back loans. Also, playing against these nations of the Third World is the fact that the US has control of 35 per cent of the IMF, enough for veto power. What this means, in effect, is that any loans to Third World nations must be approved by the US. There is also the false illusion that foreign investment will help stimulate these weaker economies. For every dollar invested in Latin America, \$4 profit is made. Export platforms are another means by which multinationals from around the world hurt these Third World nations. Workers are paid 35-60 cents an hour. In this situation absolutely nothing is injected into the economies of these nations. It is another example of blatant exploitation.

But aside from all these facts and figures we must not forget the people who suffer. I know that I will never forget them. It was when we got to know the people of the Dominican Republic, when the nameless faces became real people with hopes and dreams just like ourselves that the sadness of their situation really hit home. I will never forget going shopping in a public market in Santo Domingo and being approached by crippled beggars, many dragging themselves along the ground. I will never forget the teenage girls in my barrio, watching the afternoon soap operas on TV, perhaps dreaming one day of having a wealthy lifestyle similar to the characters portrayed. I will never forget watching a group of boys from the barrio playing baseball on a crude diamond with such vigour, perhaps dreaming one day of playing in the World Series. And I will never forget how people would ask me what I thought of their poverty, and tell me of their problems and the reasons for them. The people of the Dominican Republic have taught me a lot. They are not an ignorant people. They are aware of the reasons for their poverty, the exploitation, the injustices they suffer. They know that we are rich because they are poor. They truly are a gently, angry people. And rightly so.