

Milk for children: Cuba asks World Food Program for help



Bodega in Cuba: Basic supplies via the state-run "Libreta" booklet are becoming an ever greater challenge (Source: [Dan Lundberg/Flickr](#))

As the news agency EFE [reports](#), Cuba has for the first time asked the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) for support in supplying powdered milk for children. The UN organization, which already sends powdered milk to Cuba, has confirmed to the agency that it has received a request from the Cuban government. "We confirm that the World Food Program has received an official communication from the (Cuban) government requesting support to continue the monthly delivery of 1 kilogram of milk to children under 7 years of age throughout the country," the WFP delegation on the island wrote.

In the letter, the UN program spoke of an "urgent need" and underlined "the importance of this request", especially in the context of the "serious economic crisis that Cuba is facing", which is having a "significant impact on the food and nutrition security of the population".

Cuba has been experiencing one of the worst economic and energy crises in its history for four years now, triggered by the coronavirus pandemic and new US sanctions. One major problem is the economy's persistent structural problems, which have not been solved even by the repeatedly delayed reforms. Although supply has now improved massively with the opening of new private businesses, the government has not been able to curb inflation on the island since the 2021 currency reform, which has severely reduced the purchasing power of incomes. The heavily subsidized basic supply via the state ration booklet "Libreta", under which all children under the age of seven are allocated milk powder, is now a major challenge for the state due to the high import quota. Agricultural production has suffered a severe slump in recent years, with almost 100 percent of the food for the "Libreta" now having to be imported. As Domestic Trade Minister Betsy Velazquez explained, the country

needs 2,200 tons of milk powder every month, the purchase of which has recently been delayed "due to financial restrictions and the US economic blockade".

The request for aid from the United Nations is a first. It is the first time that Cuba has asked the World Food Program for support. Cuban media have not yet reported on the process. On Friday, however, Cuba's new Minister of Food Industry Alberto López Díaz (who only took office a few weeks ago) announced that supplies for the months of March and April could be guaranteed thanks to new deliveries from Brazil.

Despite the worst crisis in three decades, the food situation is less critical than it was at the height of the special period following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1993/94. Although the calorie supply for large parts of the population fell to alarmingly critical levels at that time, no request for support was made to the World Food Program. So why the request to the WFP now?

Cuba has been providing humanitarian aid in other countries since the revolution in 1959 and is considered a role model for the Global South in this respect. Cuban doctors were even deployed in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. Despite all the crises and problems, Cuba can also boast of maintaining basic social achievements such as free education and healthcare, albeit in a very limited form. The socialist country is regarded as the first welfare state in Latin America. As a result, requesting humanitarian aid for its own population is not something that Havana likes to make a big deal of. There are also fears that the request will immediately be seized upon by the US media and dissident groups, some of whom called for military "humanitarian intervention" in 2021. In the immediate aftermath of the protests at the time, US President Joe Biden described Cuba as a "failed state", a punch in the gut that is likely to still be deeply felt despite new talks with Washington.

The request can therefore be interpreted not only as a consequence of the critical food situation, but also as an expression of the Cuban government's greater pragmatism in dealing with the crisis: it was one of the first official acts of the new minister, who, just like his predecessor, has to scramble from month to month, from shipload to shipload, to maintain basic supplies. It is quite possible that this would have continued to work. So far, the World Food Program has only supplied six percent of the country's milk powder requirements for basic supplies. However, the government is planning extensive structural reforms this year and urgently needs investment funds to boost the economy. The basic supply via the "Libreta" is also to be restructured and only heavily subsidized for vulnerable groups. However, there are no short-term increases in domestic agricultural production in sight. An expansion of humanitarian aid could help to free up more room for maneuver for the upcoming reforms. After all the humanitarian missions in third countries, there should be no reason for Cuba to be dishonorable when requesting aid. ([Cubaheute](#))