

## Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

### U.S. 'Tuna War' escalates

*While Mexican officials try to calm the waters, Washington talks about "a can of worms" leading to commercial warfare and tourist boycotts.*

**T**hreat and counter-threat escalated at a dizzying pace throughout mid-July in the so-called "Tuna War" between the United States and Mexico.

Radicals in the Mexican Workers Party and other leftists declared July 16 that if the U.S. does not lift an embargo of Mexican tuna imports, Mexico should cut back oil deliveries to the United States.

Julian Nava, U.S. ambassador to Mexico, called a press conference the next day to declare that the U.S. too can "link" issues: "In that case," the Mexican dailies *El Nacional* and *Novedades* quote Nava as saying, "we could also include other [issues] like undocumented workers and tourism." The next morning, when the U.S. Embassy in Mexico issued its official version of Nava's remarks, this unprecedented threat was completely censored in the transcript.

Mexican officials were left puzzled by these contradictory signals from Washington. More than one remarked to *EIR* that the episode reminded them of the infamous bungling and crossed wires between ex-Ambassador Patrick Lucey and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger over the gas negotiations between the two countries. "And anyway," one irate Mexican official told *EIR*, "since when does the American Ambassador in Mexico answer the propaganda of the usual Mexican loudmouths tit for tat.

"It's almost as if Nava was en-

couraging the escalation of the 'Tuna War' into a major *casus belli* between Mexico and the U.S."

The "Tuna War" began July 9 when Mexican Navy patrol boats, under the requirements of a January 1980 Mexican law, seized three American tuna boats fishing inside Mexico's 200-mile sea limit without licenses. The United States recognizes Mexican maritime jurisdiction over 200 miles for all fish species except the "highly migratory" tuna. And so on July 15 the U.S. countered by invoking the provisions of the 1976 Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, embargoing the approximately \$20 million annual imports of Mexican tuna.

Since that move, American officials have repeatedly called for the dispute to be resolved by renewed Mexican membership in the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Agreement (IATTA). In 1976, Mexico and Costa Rica withdrew from IATTA, when U.S. opposition to Mexico's attempts to modernize its tuna fleet prevented Mexican boats from competing with the modern "tuna factories" run from San Diego. The American view was that the fish should be caught by whoever had the means to do it. "The United States owned the biggest fleet and since we had a small one, we were condemned not to grow," Mexican President José López Portillo explained publicly in a July 17 news conference.

The Mexican government made

prompt moves after the American embargo to pull the issue back from the sudden spiral of threats, while sticking by Mexico's attempts to assert control over its 200-mile zone. President López Portillo told a press conference the same day as Nava's that the new conflict was merely "an incident" in a "three-year process" of bilateral negotiations with the U.S. aimed at settling differences on the issue.

The next day, Interior Minister Enrique Olivares Santana explicitly addressed the "anti-imperialist" propaganda drive being mounted from radical left quarters in Mexico. "Let us not exacerbate our nationalism," he said. The issue requires calm reasoning, he added, so it won't "lead us to confrontation."

Mexican efforts to keep the issue in perspective are getting little help from Washington. In addition to Ambassador Nava's dubious diplomacy, the State Department and other U.S. government agencies have seized upon the tuna dispute as another element to throw at Mexico as "punishment" for Mexico's decision not to join GATT last March. (The reasons for Mexican refusal to join GATT are in fact the same as its reasons for trying to renegotiate the tuna agreement—a drive for across-the-board industrialization and modernization. GATT throws "free trade" blocks in the way of such dirigist development policies).

"Mexico has opened a can of worms and who knows what will crawl out," one State Department official commented to *EIR*. He confirmed that the U.S. is considering an enlarged embargo of all fish imports from Mexico, and that it contemplates no new negotiating offers to break the impasse.