

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

When is a casino not a casino?

Tourism Minister Rosa Luz Alegría has yet to explain the difference. It may cost her her career.

As I told you in my Dec. 22 column Tourism Minister Rosa Luz Alegría opened a can of worms when she revealed to a group of interviewers on Dec. 9 that her ministry was "studying the possibility of installing legal gambling games on our borders [with the United States] . . . as a means of attracting more tourism."

Since that date, Mexico's first woman cabinet minister has engaged in a spectacular exercise in verbal gymnastics to extricate herself from this political death-trap—to no avail. When President Lázaro Cárdenas banned casinos in the late 1930s it was to the cheers of a populace which knew all too well the kind of organized crime, prostitution, and corruption the casinos involved. It's now clear that that knowledge has not been lost today.

While the first political shock waves were reverberating in the country, and newspaper columnists opened sharp attacks, the Tourism Minister made the first of her desperate efforts to backtrack. On the national evening news program "24 Horas," she stated that she never used the word casinos in her initial statement. What she meant by games of chance, she said, were simply advanced electronic games which will stimulate "healthy competitiveness" and the expansion of "creative powers." But she did intimate that quite an elaborate plan for border gambling was in fact under consideration. To protect

Mexican workers from gambling too much at machines that were only designed to entrap gullible gringos, she said that Mexican workers could be issued special cards which, coded according to that worker's income, would set a special limit to the amount that each worker could lose.

Alegría's troubles rapidly multiplied. First the National Tourism Council, the fiefdom of Mexico's foremost political godfather of drugs and dirty money flows, Miguel Alemán, put out a statement welcoming the revival of debate on the gambling issue and specifically endorsing re-establishment of casinos. Mexico, faced with the current downturn in tourism, "must not take itself out of a world market such as gambling," the statement proclaimed.

Amidst a further spate of newspaper articles and editorials attacking the proposal, the Mexican Labor Party (PLM) called a well-attended press conference in Mexico City Dec. 22 to detail specifics on how casinos and related gambling serves as a front for laundering drug money.

Things got no easier after the New Year. On Jan. 4-5, *Excélsior* columnist Manuel Buendía published a devastating history of Mexico's experience with casinos and how they bring "organized crime and international prostitution in their wake." Buendía then reviewed the circumstances of the previous

push for legalized casinos, headed up by Ambassador to Canada Agustín Barrios Gómez and Roberto de la Madrid, governor of Baja California Norte, in 1978. President López Portillo called in Roberto de la Madrid, for a personal face-off, after which de la Madrid emerged to inform the press tersely that "It was agreed that there will be no gambling."

Stung into further public rejoinder, Alegría published a column of her own the next day in two major dailies, addressed specifically to Manuel Buendía. It was a demeaning move for a cabinet-level official. She noted once more that she had never actually used the word "casinos" when she had described her proposal to draw foreign tourists into Mexico with gambling schemes, and that she "had publicly stated her opposition" to casinos.

But the Minister also noted that "the results of 1980 showed the drastic diminution of foreign tourism and the increase in expenditure of Mexicans in the United States."

"It is easy to imagine why geniuses of the stature of Einstein dedicated their intelligence to, among other things, developing game theory and to creating mathematical games of chance that stimulate the imagination, train logical thinking and satisfy man's logical instinct—the origin of all the arts, events which manage to unify creation and recreation in one act."

Despite the inspiring rhetoric, she had failed once again to explain how such "technetronic age" gadgetry could possibly pull big-spending American gamblers south of the border to remedy the tourism decline—unless it was indeed just the cover for re-opening casinos and other outlawed gambling rackets.