

# 'Informal economy' spreads cholera

by Ana M. Mendoza-Phau

At the opening session of an emergency meeting of the Cholera Task Force set up by the Pan-American Health Organization, held in Washington, D.C. April 29-May 3, PAHO director Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo stated that the "most specific characteristic of the cholera epidemic is [that it is] a shocking expression of the accumulation of deficiencies in the standard of living of our populations . . . the accumulation of a social debt."

Dr. Guerra was speaking as cholera has continued to spread throughout Ibero-America. As of May 7, seven nations have been hit with the epidemic, the latest two being Argentina and the Dominican Republic. There are currently over 175,000 documented cases on the continent, and PAHO calculates that 6 million people are going to be infected and 42,000 will die due to this epidemic. In fact, Dr. Guerra stated outright that it is impossible to stop the epidemic.

## Investment of \$200 billion needed

At the meeting, called in order to design a regional emergency plan to deal with the epidemic, the PAHO director said, "We consider the problem of cholera a political and social development that shows clearly a standard of living of extreme poverty" on the continent. Yet, he argued that the return of this "cursed disease" also creates an "extraordinary opportunity that should go beyond just discussing the limits of treatment, but to also place before the conscience of leaders the profound problem of extreme poverty." Dr. Guerra insisted that "we should take advantage of the opportunity that cholera creates to settle our social debt and initiate the process of correcting the deficiencies of infrastructure that in reality are the cause of the epidemic." He called for massive investment in infrastructure as the only way to contain the cholera epidemic.

On May 2, Dr. Guerra made the same point at a conference of Ibero-American health officials and ministers in Madrid. "The economic policies of governments, which set priorities above those of the population's health," are responsible for the spread of the disease, he said, a clear reference to the austerity policies imposed by every Ibero-American government under the pressure of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and creditor banks in order to pay the

foreign debt. Dr. Guerra estimated that \$200 billion needed to be invested over the next decade in order to rebuild necessary water and health services throughout the continent. Of this, \$80 billion is needed just to provide potable water.

## Poor face hunger or cholera

At the PAHO meeting, Dr. Dilma S. Gelli from Brazil presented the findings of a research team of doctors which recently visited Lima, Peru, where cholera first broke out. The aim was to get a reading on the level of contamination and potential for spreading the disease in the food sold in the street markets in Lima, where a large percentage of the poor population eats daily. The findings left everyone in the room astonished.

The main foods people eat, such as *ceviche* (raw fish marinated in lemon juice), potato salad *a la huancaína*, fruit juices, ice cream, seafood, rice with chicken, pasta, sauces, etc., were found to be contaminated. Some 100 micro-organisms of the bacterium *vibrio cholerae* for each gram of *ceviche* were found in most of the tests. The bacteria were also found to be present in the intestines, as well as on the skin, of fish in treated and untreated waters, on seafood shells, etc. Because of the contamination of water, many of the vegetables sold are also carrying the bacteria.

One of the main problems, Dr. Gelli explained, is the way the food is handled, since there is no clean water available in these markets in order for vendors to wash their hands, clean the dishes, food, or anything. When vendors handle the seafood and then serve the food, they are unknowingly spreading the disease to all their customers.

Dr. Gelli proceeded to show slides of some of Lima's street markets. These street markets are precisely the so-called "informal economy" so heavily promoted by Peruvian presidential adviser Hernando de Soto, whom George Bush has praised as his favorite Ibero-American economist. Such an "informal economy" is what Bush hopes to spread throughout Ibero-America with his Enterprise for the Americas Initiative. The slides showed the foodstands in these markets packed with people eating contaminated food. Many of them have told television crews that their choice is either to die of hunger, or of cholera. The slides also showed dogs running around taking food out of garbage cans and spreading it all around, and clearly, no source of clean or treated water or refrigeration exists at all in these markets.

Such street markets exist in virtually every country in Ibero-America. Often there are entire areas in the cities where one stand after another sells all kinds of prepared foods, raw food, vegetables, and so forth, at much cheaper prices than at supermarkets or stores. They are basically the way in which the poor feed the poor.

After seeing these slides, it was clear that either these street markets are shut down by the governments, and replaced with clean sources of nourishment for the population, or the cholera epidemic is not going to be stopped.