

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Cota Meza

Cholera has arrived

The secretary of health should be fired for his negligence in the face of a public health emergency.

A press release issued by Secretary of Health Jesús Kumate on June 17 announced that "a small outbreak of cholera" had been detected in a remote rural town in the state of Mexico. Laboratory tests confirmed the presence of the *vibrio cholera* bacterium in 17 people, 5 of whom required hospitalization, while the other 12 displayed lesser symptoms of diarrhea, vomiting, and fever. According to other reports, the first cases appeared on June 12.

San Miguel Totolmayola, the infected town, is a rural community with fewer than 1,500 inhabitants, lost in the La Goleta mountain range. Almost adjacent to the state of Guerrero, the town is more than 200 kilometers from Mexico City. The San Miguel River flows through the town. A considerable number of towns, such as San Miguel, lie along the banks of this and other rivers through more than 50 kilometers of low mountains.

The outbreak of cholera had been expected, but this region was believed to be an extremely low-risk area. San Miguel is located in a mountain range in the central Mexican plain, more than 2,000 meters above sea level, far from any seaports, more than 1,000 kilometers from the border with Central America, and with the closest international airport being that of Toluca, more than 80 kilometers away. The ports, along the southern border, and the airports were the places where the Health Ministry had established its strictest control points, to try and keep cholera from entering the country.

One hypothesis is that an infected drug-trafficker from South America

was the carrier of the bacteria, because a clandestine airport was found some 15 kilometers from San Miguel. This "clandestine visitor" is presumed to have defecated in the waters of the river. This hypothesis, however, was rejected as impossible by the governor of the state, Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza, on the ludicrous grounds that "no drug-trafficking problems exist in this area."

Secretary of Health Kumate, however, has far surpassed the governor in ignoring reality.

In March, Kumate gave a press conference from the La Vega marketplace, the largest retail market for fresh fish in Mexico City. While downing a succulent banquet of the sea's bounty, Secretary Kumate reassured Mexicans that "Peruvian cholera will not enter Mexico," pooh-poohed any need for "specific campaigns" to prevent the disease, and decried as absurd the idea that "marine life are carriers."

Kumate insisted on these points again during a May visit to Mexico by Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, who had earlier put on a similar irresponsible display for his own population.

But it is one thing to eat, and another to defecate, actions which the secretary has apparently confused. Everyone knows that cholera is an illness of poverty, lack of hygiene, and lack of sanitation infrastructure. He who becomes infected by cholera is he who has ingested food or water contaminated by excrement.

Cholera is a diarrhetic disease. There were 65 million cases of severe diarrhea in 1988 in Mexico. Diarrhea

had the second highest morbidity rate among all age groups.

Despite the chilling indifference of the health secretary, other branches of the health sector, as well as other parts of the government, have declared a red alert over the arrival of cholera to Mexico.

The government—including Jesús Kumate—knew that as soon as cholera reached Central America, the disease would invade Mexico as well. That is because Mexico joins with the Central American countries to form one single stretch of poverty, hunger, death, and marginality. According to United Nations statistics, some 200,000 Central Americans live in Mexico.

Now, the disease can expand from the Mexican plateau to any population center in the country.

According to government news service Notimex, 14 days after the identification of the outbreak in San Miguel (where there have now been 26 cases), another case of cholera was detected on June 31 in Tula, Hidalgo, a town located only 80 kilometers away from Mexico City.

The capital of the country is now one immense red alert zone. Cholera has arrived in the Mexican plateau during the rainy season, which brings lashing rains to Mexico City, which cause rivers and drainage systems to overflow their banks.

Mexico City regent Camacho Solís attempted to assure city residents that the government maintains "a permanent strategy in case of cholera." Seventy-one drainage spots are being monitored, as are overflow points of the "Great Canal," through which waste waters from the city flow uncovered for more than 9 kilometers—threatening more than 32 poor neighborhoods. Nobody, however, has proposed spending the money to replace the canal with an adequate sewage system.