

Cholera hits Ibero-America while governments fiddle

by Peter Rush

Ten years of depression in Ibero-America, induced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the banks, and the leading western governments led by the United States, are taking their toll in such ways as the spread of cholera, now poised to break out anew in epidemics that will span the continent from Mexico to Argentina. Where one year ago, the disease was unknown in the Western Hemisphere, almost 300,000 people in several dozen countries have since contracted it, and nearly 3,000 have died, while millions more are threatened next year as South America heads into its summer months. Dozens of stories from many countries have appeared since the beginning of November warning of what is in store. Already, the first case reported in the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro has caused a panic, while Colombia reports 125 soldiers in one army battalion have contracted it. In Peru, a new outbreak has begun that could afflict hundreds of thousands, even as the government of President Alberto Fujimori cuts back funding for anti-cholera programs.

The ground for the present health crisis has been laid since 1982, when the governments of virtually every Ibero-American country decided to accept IMF dictates, and slash all investment for development, among other austerity measures. Since cholera—characterized by acute diarrhea that can kill a man in 12 hours by dehydration if fluids and salts are not properly replenished—spreads where there is unclean water, poor sanitation, or inadequate sewage treatment and disposal, these cutbacks in health infrastructure have turned major sections of most Ibero-American cities, and many rural areas as well, into breeding grounds for this, and many other, diseases. Cholera is a disease of poverty and inadequate infrastructure.

New cause for worry is the appearance in Peru of a much more virulent strain which kills in two hours. If this strain

spreads, the disease could begin to kill tens, even hundreds of thousands, as compared to the several thousand casualties to date.

A Pan-American Health Organization study released earlier this year estimated that \$200 billion would have to be invested across the continent to eliminate the threat of cholera and provide adequate water and sewage systems for all. But rather than even begin to make this investment, virtually every government is busily trying to cover up the extent of its spread, minimize public awareness of its dangers, and underestimate the number of cases, in order not to violate agreements with the IMF limiting government expenditures to debt service and the most minimal of other expenditures. In Peru, site of the first outbreak, the government has taken the astounding action of closing down one of the few state-run laboratories which produces the packets of salts required to rehydrate cholera patients—for non-payment of a new tax ordered by the IMF!

Brazil fears urban epidemic

With the announcement in the last week of November that a soldier carrying cholera had returned on furlough from the Amazon to the Rio de Janeiro slum where his family lived, and that a companion of his staying somewhere in Rio might be carrying and spreading the bacteria without knowing it, a panic was set off. Authorities immediately closed two beaches adjacent to the place where sewage from the slum, called a *favela*, emptied into the ocean, and mounted an all-points search for the companion, whose whereabouts is still unknown. The fear, quite justified, is that if cholera once gets a foothold in Rio, it could quickly threaten at least 200,000 people living in desperate poverty in the *favelas*. Once established there, it would inevitably spread

to other major Brazilian cities.

There is also extreme nervousness on the part of the Brazilian government that a large cholera outbreak in Rio and other cities will scare people away from the government's pet project, the Eco-92 "Earth Summit," scheduled for June 1992.

Cholera in Brazil is threatening to break out of the deep Amazon jungle region, where it had spread from Peru in the summer, into the populous and poor Northeast. The coordinator of Brazil's national anti-cholera program, Baldur Schubert, warned that the spread of cholera down the banks of several Amazon tributaries endangers at least 5 million people between the Peruvian border and the coastal city of Belém. The "precarious system of basic sanitation" in the region "provides ideal conditions for the proliferation" of cholera there, he warned. The Amazon city of Manaus has already reported 325 cases, with an average of one more every day.

The president of the Brazilian Association of Sanitation Engineering, Luiz Otavio Mota Pereira, warned in early November that if significant measures are not taken, Brazil will face the prospect of 30 million victims and 30,000 deaths in three years, and a loss of \$12 billion to the economy.

Fujimori condemns Peru

Peru, where 250,000 have been infected and 2,500 have died so far, is facing the prospect of worse in the summer season which has just begun. "The risk of an outbreak of cholera is high," reported *Caretas* magazine Nov. 11, in an article that went on to claim that the Rimac River, which the 6 million inhabitants of Lima depend on for their water, is nothing but "a large public latrine," and quoted doctors saying that the summer months between December and March will reactivate the reservoir of bacteria.

The outbreak has already begun. Ten persons died in less than a week in the southern department of Ica in the third week of November, according to the daily *Expreso*. *La República* newspaper reported that, in one Lima hospital, the number of cases jumped suddenly in the middle of November from 4 patients a day to 13. This is just the beginning. A report issued by Dr. Graciela Fernández Baca, as reported in *La República* Dec. 1, revealed that nearly 10 million children, more than two-thirds of all children in the country, suffer from chronic malnutrition, and that the average Peruvian family has reduced its caloric intake by 19% since Fujimori took office in June 1990. Malnutrition greatly lowers resistance to cholera, as does the prior presence of tuberculosis and other diseases, the incidence of which is rising rapidly as well. And the average Peruvian family can only afford to pay 0.37% of its total income on health care.

In the face of this, the Fujimori government is doing virtually nothing. A promised effort to improve the sanitation situation never materialized. A Unicef report, reported by *La República* Dec. 2, indicated that an optimal expenditure to combat cholera would be \$1.5 billion for all social sectors,

whereas the government has allocated only \$300 million, one-fifth that needed, for health, education, sanitation, food aid, and employment assistance.

Mexico, Argentina ignore reality

The governments of Mexico and Argentina are both making every attempt to play down the cholera threat. In Mexico, the newspaper *Uno Mas Uno* reported in early November that cholera spread to 16 states in 150 days, infecting 1,883 persons, disproving the government's claim that "there is no epidemic." But the Mexican administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari is desperate not to scare away any American tourists whose money the government needs to cover a huge foreign exchange deficit; consequently Health Minister Jesús Kumate consistently downplays the problem, underreporting the number of cases. Above all, he fears that the news of reports of a cholera epidemic in Mexico will turn the American population even more firmly against the free trade agreement that Salinas has wagered his entire administration on securing.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* on Dec. 4 reported that the Mexican government is deliberately covering up the fact that cholera cases are infecting, and killing, Mexicans within 12 miles of the glamorous beaches Acapulco. One local epidemiologist said that people in the impoverished regions surrounding Acapulco are dying needlessly because of the cover-up. "People aren't taking the necessary precautions because the government is telling them it's diarrhea, which they have always had."

In Argentina, the health minister of the northern province of Salta declared that it would be impossible to stop the spread of cholera crossing the border from Peru. But the government of President Carlos Menem claims that it can prevent a few cases from becoming an epidemic. The figures indicate otherwise. The principal diseases for which Argentines have been admitted to hospitals recently have been waterborne. Thirty-five percent of the country lacks potable water, and 65% lacks sewage facilities.

Dr. Antonio Bonifasi, head of the Federal Council on Potable Water and Sanitation, warned that "the sector is in a critical situation given that our country, which once led Latin America in provision of potable water and sewage disposal, is now near the bottom of the list. This is because of vast disinvestment in the sector." He added that the situation was critical in Buenos Aires "because of lack of potable water [and] contamination by sewage."

Cholera may be the disease that is spreading most visibly, but it is far from the only epidemic. Several countries have also reported rapidly rising incidence of malaria and yellow fever. Tuberculosis is making a comeback, even as it has in the United States. Dengue and chagas, two horrible tropical diseases, continue to afflict millions. AIDS is also spreading rapidly, already afflicting an estimated 500,000 Brazilians and untold numbers of others throughout the region. 3