

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Behind the abortion battle

Prospective changes in the civil code have heated up a fundamental conflict over population policy.

The changes proposed in Mexico's civil code last August, which include expansion of the categories in which abortion would be legally sanctioned, have sparked a debate in the country over demographic policy.

President Miguel de la Madrid, in a startling campaign address in Tabasco in early 1982, had first broached the idea of "taking a national reading" on the abortion issue. He did not advocate specific liberalization measures, but made it clear he favored some loosening up, by the mere fact that he brought the issue up.

It is not clear yet how the debate will be resolved—nor if it can be resolved without the deep rifts and bitterness plaguing Mediterranean Catholic countries such as Spain and Italy.

Some voices of opposition, such as the Church's, were expected. The Mexican Church issued a communiqué Sept. 27, charging that those who were presenting population growth as a disaster were using falsified statistics. The statement warned that respect for life is the first precept of society, and legalizing abortion would lead to other anti-life measures such as eugenics.

Other major sectors opposed to the changes are peasant and worker groups who trace their philosophy to the Argentine adage of the 19th century, resurrected by President Luis Echeverría in the 1970s: "To govern is to populate."

Mario Hernández Posadas, head of the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), the official peasant wing of the ruling PRI party, prefaced his an-

nouncement of a National CNC Plan of Guidance and Family Planning, with sharp words:

"We must be very careful because there are countries which, in their efforts to control births, have ended up without a youth. At this moment it is a problem for them, because being a nation of old people represents a problem. Before everything else, we must guarantee the wellbeing of future generations. Demographic policy must be set according to possibilities and not lacks."

A few weeks before, the Women's sector of the CNC had declared that they opposed abortion for being contrary to the traditions of Mexico. What is most important now, the women said, is to think about producing more food to satisfy the needs of the Mexican population.

The sharply defined opposition to Malthusian doctrine contrasts greatly with the activities of the Minister of Education, Jesús Reyes Heróles, who has attempted to turn educational curriculum into a litany of the sins of "overpopulation" and "greedy human beings."

But the heart of the official promotion of anti-natalist sentiment resides in the Ministry of Health and Welfare (SSA).

For some years the ministry has functioned in close collaboration with the networks of the former governor of Mexico State, Gustavo Baz, who introduced methods of psychological conditioning in mental health programs which borrowed from the clinical brainwashing techniques of Brit-

ain's Tavistock Institute. Among other protégés of the Baz networks is former Mexico State governor and former mayor of Mexico City Carlos Hank González, who is scrambling to strike deals with a hostile de la Madrid.

The ministry today, under Dr. Guillermo Soberón (former director of the National Autonomous University) and his deputy minister Dr. José Laguna García, have insisted that the medical system was placing an excessively high value on advanced treatments and technologies. The immense pressure for Mexico to cut imports, enforced by the International Monetary Fund, has provided the appropriate screen for such "barefoot doctor" approaches.

A long list of vitally needed medicines and medical equipment has been cut from SSA's import authorization schedules. Dr. Laguna has been overheard declaring baldly, "We must choose which sick we are going to save." In some major downtown Mexico City hospitals, mortality rates have jumped 20 percent since the onset of the IMF restrictions in December 1982. Doctors in these hospitals say that the increase is attributable to the shutoff of imported medicines and equipment, as well as overcrowding.

The latest move by the Malthusians, working with "triage" and "lifeboat ethics" propagandists in anti-population institutes in Washington and the U.N. bureaucracy, is the release Oct. 22 of a new movie, *Abortion: Song to Life*. The actors are all drawn from popular Mexican TV soap operas produced by Mexico's monopolistic private media empire, Televisa. Televisa, which pioneered putting "subliminal" population reduction messages into its soap operas, recently inaugurated special programming on its "culture channel" devoted to the resurrection of the legitimacy of euthanasia.