

Dateline Mexico by Hugo López Ochoa

Now comes the AIDS panic

Dramatic revelations on the spread of the contagion here confirm the link to economic deterioration.

Addressing Mexico's First National Congress on AIDS, in Cocoyoc, Morelos, Nov. 30-Dec. 2, Health Minister Guillermo Soberón Acevedo warned that, short of a miracle, "Mexico will be helpless to fight AIDS, which threatens to become an epidemic in our country, as of 1988." Soberón added, "It has already become a priority national problem."

Chilling figures were presented at the congress on the merciless advance of the disease; the unspoken but unavoidable truth that came through was that the economic havoc wrought by International Monetary Fund-dictated policies over the past five years has reduced the living and nutritional levels of the Mexican population to the point that immunological defenses have been stripped. In fact, the tragedy of AIDS-ravaged Africa could well be Mexico's not-so-distant future.

The figures speak for themselves. From March through October of this year, the number of cases officially registered in the country rose from 344 to 779, representing an average growth rate of 400%. However, in specific areas of the country, such as the states of Jalisco, Coahuila, Baja California, and Nuevo León, it is doubling every four to five months, signifying an 800% annual growth rate! In March, 111 persons died of AIDS; in October, 231 AIDS victims succumbed. These figures were presented by the health ministry's director general of epidemiology, Jaime Sepúlveda Amor. Deputy Minister of Health Jesús Ka-

mata added that AIDS had already arrived in rural zones of the country.

Most frightening is the growing incidence of AIDS among Mexico's children, especially because the proportion of AIDS-infected minors under 15 years of age is three times that of the United States. In eight months, the officially recognized number of minors infected with AIDS rose from 4 to 26. While among Mexican adults, there is 1 infected woman for every 21 infected men, among minors of 15 years or less, that ratio is 3 to 1. Sepúlveda Amor announced that the fact that the number of cases of perinatal transmission—three in the first eight months of this year—had increased, meant that the epidemic has already affected the heterosexual population.

Further, despite the legislation to regulate blood transfusions rushed onto the books in mid-1987, the rate of infection by transfusion rose from 4.6% to 7.8% in October. Perhaps the reason can be found in Minister Soberón's argument against "closing the border" to conduct obligatory health tests on those entering the country. "In addition to causing panic" and "affecting tourism," he argued, "blood tests have not proven infallible, because the virus does not have a definite period of incubation." He then confessed the real reason: "Besides, the cost of these tests is very high."

It was the seriousness of these figures which motivated various medical organizations to organize the First National Congress on AIDS. Among

them were the Mexican Association of Epidemiology, the Mexican Association of Immunology, the Mexican Association of Infectious Disease, the Mexican Society for the Study of Hematology, and the Mexican Association of Internal Medicine.

Not appearing at the conference was the Mexican Association for Fusion Energy (AMEF), whose public campaign against the theory that AIDS is limited to so-called "risk groups" has shaken the country. Nonetheless, the influence of the AMEF was reflected in the fact that during the three days of the congress, the government ran a very expensive media campaign to deny that AIDS can be transmitted through mosquitoes, sweat, tears, or casual contact.

But the most pathetic performance at the national AIDS congress was that of the attending homosexual contingent, represented by Gerardo Ortega Zurita, of the homosexual Revolutionary Action group. Ortega Zurita's group, which has violently opposed application of the standard public health measure of quarantining AIDS victims, calling it a "violation of human rights," urged instead the application of euthanasia for AIDS sufferers. This folly extended to Mexico's health authorities as well. While not explicitly endorsing Ortega Zurita's proposal, neither have they rejected it. Health Minister Soberón told the congress that "family education" was required for AIDS.

Thus, instead of acknowledging the need for a debt moratorium which would free up resources to rebuild the Mexican economy and raise the living standards of the population, the government is instead trying to convince the Mexican people that the disease limits itself to high-risk groups, thereby obviating the need for a costly public health program. Just what the IMF ordered.