

## Dateline Mexico by Hugo López Ochoa

### Laguna Verde, hostage

*Mexico's first commercial nuclear plant is being held hostage to the vagaries of presidential politics.*

In November of 1987, the International Atomic Energy Commission issued its final report on Laguna Verde, Mexico's first commercial nuclear reactor and a symbol of Mexico's 21st-century industrial potential. The report stated that the nuclear complex had met all security norms and was approved for start-up. Days later, the ruling PRI party's official presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, declared at a campaign event that "no decision would be made on nuclear policy before consulting the people."

Salinas's statement, widely interpreted in political circles as a deliberate freeze of the project, signifies that Laguna Verde is being held hostage to the short-term exigencies of Mexican presidential politics. In fact, it is being said throughout Mexico that the delay in charging up Laguna Verde's first reactor is out of fear that the PRI will lose votes in next July's national elections—despite the fact that the hardcore ecologists in the country number less than 300!

The greenies' guru, José Arias Chávez, admitted in a Feb. 15 interview with the magazine *Mexico Journal* that his movement "has more influence" than followers. Nonetheless, he bragged that he had succeeded in terrifying the government, and suggested, "If the reactor is not loaded before the elections, it never will be, because the ecology movement is growing." This growth, he declared, includes influence "on certain state ministers, such as [former Budget and Planning Minister] Salinas de Gortari and Urban Development and Ecology

Minister Manuel Camacho Solís."

Chávez also claims the backing of presidential candidates Manuel Clouthier (PAN), Heberto Castillo (PMS), Gildardo Magana (PDM), Rosario Ibarra de Piedra (PRT), and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (FDN). Given that the greenies have never managed to gather more than 300 hysterics at any one time for their anti-Laguna Verde protests, it would appear that their relationship to these campaigns has less to do with votes, and more to do with running post-electoral "anti-fraud" violence. Under such circumstances, targeted violence against Laguna Verde would set the stage for "negotiating" its reconversion to a gas-burning electricity plant, as the ecologists have demanded.

As of today, more than \$2 billion has been invested in the reactor now ready for charge-up, and for part of the second reactor. Each of them represents 654 megawatts of potential energy. It would cost another \$1.2 billion to reconvert them into thermal plants. But the real costs would in fact be much higher.

Taking into account that each day of reactor inactivity is costing 932 million pesos, and that the reconversion process would take at least another four years, the total loss should the ecologists' blackmail succeed in preventing the reactors' activation would be \$1.1 billion. Adding this to previous costs, turning Laguna Verde into a gas-burning power plant would ultimately cost \$5.3 billion, nearly double the total estimated investment in the current two nuclear units!

Especially ironic is the fact that while the Mexican government is subjecting the nation to genocidal conditions in the name of "economic austerity," it is simultaneously sabotaging a critical energy source in favor of an "alternative" which would impose a several billion-dollar financial burden on the economy.

The costs would be extremely high in ecological terms as well. The 1,308 megawatt capacity of the two nuclear reactors represents 6% of the nation's current electricity production. If the ecologists are truly concerned about the deforestation of the country, they should know that 44.7% of current energy consumption in the country is supplied by wood used by peasant communities who have no access to electricity.

In the bizarre world the PRI has entered since the government's surrender to International Monetary Fund austerity dictates, reason is turned on its head—to the tragedy of the nation. It would have been far cheaper—politically and economically—for the government to have charged up the reactor and continued the massive educational campaign begun in August-September 1987, with the slogan, "The idea is to make light at Laguna Verde," which was suspended with the nomination of Salinas de Gortari as the PRI's presidential candidate.

Well-placed sources report that the key person behind the decision to halt the loading of the reactor at Laguna Verde and to submit any such decision to a national "referendum" is the current director of the Institute for Political, Economic, and Social Studies of the PRI, Enrique González Pedrero. Also governor of Tabasco, González Pedrero heads the Social Democratic faction in the PRI and is author of the book, *The Wealth of Poverty*, which argues for the deindustrialization of Mexico.