

## Dateline Mexico by Héctor Apolinar

### Church warns of advance of drug trade

*The economic austerity imposed by the de la Madrid government has given organized crime a field day.*

**T**he Mexican Bishops' Conference issued a statement on May 27 which warned that the illegal drug trade was advancing across the nation, threatening to become "a state within a state."

The sobering statement of the Catholic hierarchy further charged that the drug trade is moving with greater rapidity among Mexican agricultural regions because of "the shortage of credit and low price guarantees. . . . Drug cultivation is how they manage, since for any peasant, it would appear more profitable to grow drugs than agricultural products."

The Mexican Catholic leaders also charged that "a perfectly organized clandestine network for the distribution of seeds, credit, and fertilizer, exists," and that the drug crops are supervised, harvested, and sold using sophisticated technologies.

The bishops stated that this situation is having monstrous effects on the nation's agricultural sector and on the peasant population, since "where poppy and marijuana are sown, the system of production is altered . . . because human resources, which should normally be dedicated to food production, are being diverted to drug cultivation."

The bishops' document adds that the cultivation of poppy and marijuana is no longer carried out in distant regions of the country, but in accessible zones.

Land under drug cultivation, the document says, is expanding daily.

The bishops further warn of the negative moral and cultural impact the

drug economy is having on Mexican society, creating "an environment of fear, terror, involuntary migration, threats, and pressures."

In another section of the Church document, the link between the drug trade and arms trafficking is denounced, and the headquarters of such weapons-for-drugs dealing in Mexico, is identified as being in the United States.

Finally, the document courageously asserts that, due to the magnitude of the drug trade in the country, it is clear that at least some government authorities must be complicit.

The frightening, but faithful, picture that the Church hierarchy paints of the drug trade's growing dominance of Mexican agriculture was fully confirmed by Justo Díaz del Castillo, president of the Inter-American Confederation of Cattle Raisers and Growers.

Díaz del Castillo declared on May 31 that the drug trade had "violently evicted" agricultural and cattle producers of Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia, and that the same process was occurring in Mexico, where the worst afflicted have been the farmers. Díaz del Castillo detailed how growers are pressured by the drug traffickers to either sell their lands at high prices, or face assassination.

The Church's brave warning about the Mexican agricultural sector is also intended to sound the alarm regarding the economic policies of the Miguel de la Madrid government, which with its shock austerity policies has fostered—willfully or not—the advance

of the drug trade.

Over the past five years, the tightening of the austerity tourniquet on the economy has been directly proportional to the growth of the drug trade, to the point that "in some municipalities and states of the republic, it is already a vital force that moves and controls all main activities," according to journalist Francisco Cárdenas Cruz, writing May 17 in the daily *El Universal*.

Although the two-sided coin of austerity/drug trafficking is not exclusive to Mexico, its path can be traced very clearly in this country.

Since 1983, the National Food Program prepared by the Budget and Planning Ministry established that, due to the "economic crisis," certain foods could no longer be profitably produced.

Water programs to open up new lands to cultivation were suspended, and state expenditure for maintenance of existing water infrastructure was reduced.

Since then, interest rates for farm credit have continued to shrink, the price of fertilizers and other agricultural inputs has constantly risen, and price guarantees for agricultural products have been kept far below their cost of production.

For all of these reasons, many farm producers have been forced into bankruptcy, having to lease or sell their lands in a hurry. Under such conditions, the offers of the drug traffickers are enticing indeed.

Now, with the worst drought in three decades ravaging the country—its devastation heightened by the government's abandonment of desperately needed water projects over the past five years—thousands of head of cattle are dying, and the government has decided that several hundred thousand of irrigated hectares in the northeast of the country will be left to lie fallow.