

Peru minister blames Fujimori for cholera

by Valerie Rush

Peruvian Health Minister Carlos Vidal Layseca resigned the week of March 18, charging the Fujimori government with the deliberate sabotage of efforts to control and contain the cholera epidemic now spreading at an escalating rate throughout the population. Said Vidal, "Some wanted us to say the cholera epidemic didn't exist, to say that it was acute diarrhea of unknown origin. That was unacceptable." He added that if the epidemic had begun with 2-4,000 deaths, the response of the administration might have been a serious one. But since the deaths came from the poorest sectors of the population, said Vidal, "there was no such reaction from the state."

In fact, the Fujimori government's policy of murderous austerity coupled with criminal neglect is being explicitly dictated by its creditor banks. It is no accident that Citibank President John Reed declared a few months back, "Certain countries are going to disappear. . . . Peru and Bolivia are going to disappear."

'Emergencies cost too much'

According to Vidal, his resignation was triggered by a head-on confrontation with Economics Minister Carlos Boloña because, under current conditions, "one cannot cut the health sector by 10%." Vidal had demanded in February that a national emergency be declared to deal with the cholera contagion. Then-Economics Minister Juan Hurtado Miller had refused, saying, "No state of emergency will be declared, because that would demand extraordinary expenditures which are not now needed." Boloña announced in mid-March that he would continue and "intensify" the economic policies of his predecessor.

Vidal also charged a deliberate withholding of funds. Those same charges were made by Chimbote bishop Monsignor Luis Bambarén Gastelumendi, who resigned March 13 from the Chimbote presidency of the Special Commission to Fight Cholera after promised funds to build sanitation projects in the slums of that city were never delivered.

The former health minister was also in constant conflict with President Fujimori and his Fishing Minister Félix Canal, who have repeatedly and publicly insisted that consumption of the Peruvian dish *ceviche* (marinated raw fish) posed no threat of contagion—despite charges by Vidal and the Peru-

vian medical profession that a sharp rise in the number of cholera victims followed Fujimori's televised promotion of *ceviche* as entirely safe to eat. Said Vidal, "There are two kinds of *ceviche*: that of the poor and that of the rich." Fujimori's dish was prepared from deep-sea fish, unlike the average Peruvian's *ceviche*, which is made from fish caught in Peru's severely polluted coastal waters.

Water cutbacks will spread cholera

Latest official estimates of cholera cases in Peru are 72,000, although scores of thousands more victims are believed to be in more isolated interior regions of the country. While the death rate is still at a low 0.5%, doctors are predicting that it could soon skyrocket to 40-70%. A major factor will be the decision by the Lima water authority to reduce water allocation to much of the city by 30%, blaming drought conditions and a labor strike. Hardest hit will be the already water-poor shanty towns that surround Lima where, according to the head of one Lima hospital, "there are people who don't have enough water even to wash their hands."

On March 20, UPI news service reported that "Thousands of Peruvians have begun to bring pots and pitchers to Lima fire stations, parks, and state-owned businesses, waiting on long lines to obtain enough water to prepare food and perform minimal hygiene. . . . More than 35% of the population in Lima and 65% of rural residents live in neighborhoods without access to running water or sewage services."

The cholera epidemic has spread from Peru to Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil and, now, Chile as well. Outbreaks are also reported in Argentina and Bolivia. The Colombian weekly *Semana* said scientists fear the contagion will follow drug-trafficking and contraband routes, causing "a tragedy of gigantic proportions," since the necessarily clandestine nature of such activity prevents medical and sanitary control over cross-border movements. Mexico and, especially, poverty-stricken Guatemala are believed to be high-risk targets of contagion as well.

But cholera is just "the tip of the iceberg," according to Mexican journalist Antonio Hernández Montoya, who wrote in *El Día Latinoamericano* March 11, "The cholera epidemic which is ravaging Peru, which has already arrived in Ecuador and which threatens to spread across the region, is only the most spectacular aspect of the difficult situation threatening the area health-wise, as a result of the persistent economic crisis of what has been called [Ibero-America's] 'lost decade.' "

Indeed, it is now reported that at least 3 million Brazilians in 10 states could be victims of a yellow fever resurgence. In the state of Bahia, according to Brazil's health ministry, they have also recorded outbreaks of bubonic plague, the Black Death of the Middle Ages. Finally, the Pan-American Health Organization is predicting that the number of AIDS victims in Ibero-America—currently estimated at one million—will double by the year 1995.