

Cholera in the U.S. 'a matter of time'

by Valerie Rush

With the discovery of one cholera case in Canada and the rapid spread of the disease across Mexico and Central America, U.S. health specialists are convinced that cholera outbreaks in the United States are just a matter of time.

According to Paul Blake, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, "Trying to keep it out is just about impossible." Blake disputed claims that U.S. living standards will contain the disease, noting that there were many, and spreading, pockets of poverty in the U.S. lacking proper water and sewage facilities, precisely the conditions for breeding a cholera epidemic.

One such pocket of poverty lies just north of San Diego, California, where over 10,000 migrant Mexican workers live in squalor, with no electricity, public services, or sanitation facilities. Health authorities in San Diego began testing thousands of these workers for the cholera bacteria after Mexican Health Secretary Jesús Kumate announced the existence of 253 cholera cases in that country. Said physician Stephen Waterman, San Diego faces "a potential danger" of a cholera outbreak, especially in light of recent budget cutbacks in health and medical services for the poor.

Kumate insists that the disease is "under control," but five Mexican states have officially reported cholera outbreaks. Two Health Department physicians broke their silence Aug. 1 to demand that "the truth must be told about cholera, as the disease—like any other—requires a great awareness on the part of the population to prevent it, since it is a question of hygiene."

While Mexico's worst cases are occurring in outlying rural areas like poverty-stricken Chiapas along the Guatemalan border, the disease is also spreading in the interior of the country. The city of Puebla, just a few hours from Mexico City, is reporting scores of cases and numerous deaths, and at least two victims of the disease have now been acknowledged in Mexico City. According to Mexico City official Eduardo Cano, the cholera bacillus has been found in the raw sewage flowing out of Mexico City that is used to irrigate surrounding croplands. Mexico City and its metropolitan surroundings are home to nearly 20 million people. As of Aug. 1, the Mexican Department of Health was admitting to only three cholera deaths, and to a total of 327 cases. However, scores of cholera fatalities are

being reported in the local media.

Fearful of a cholera contagion spreading among the 41,000 Central Americans living in Mexican refugee camps along the border with Guatemala, the U.N. High Commission for Refugees has prohibited the direct consumption of water in the camps. But Erasmo Sainz Carrete, the head of the Mexican refugee organization, said that controlling cholera in the camps would be easy in comparison to the problems Mexico will face should the slums surrounding Mexico City become infected, "because it would be practically impossible to control it."

Central America, another 'Peru'

Guatemala is the first Central American country to be hit with the cholera epidemic, and 20 official cases were being reported as of Aug. 6, out of a likely 60 under investigation. Guatemalan President Jorge Serrano Elias has declared a national emergency, noting the irony that "we had thought [the disease] would come from the south, but it hit us from the north," that is, from Mexico. If the epidemic in Guatemala surges out of control, an estimated 700,000 (out of a total population of 9.5 million) could become infected. Comparisons between Guatemala and Peru are regularly made by the media, in view of the fact that Guatemala has but one doctor and one hospital bed per thousand inhabitants.

Sixteen of Guatemala's cholera victims have been identified in the southwest, bordering El Salvador, which has just announced a state of alert in anticipation of the arrival of cholera there "within a matter of hours." Next door, Honduras is gearing for an outbreak there. And on Aug. 6, nervous Panamanian health authorities seized an entire boatload of food and fish products which was purchased in various Central American countries and sold in the Panamanian port of Colón without passing through sanitary controls.

The disease is spreading rapidly in Colombia, although officials there—as in Mexico—are scrambling to deny it. Cholera outbreaks have been detected all along its Atlantic, Pacific, and Caribbean coasts, while at least four urban cases of cholera have been identified in the capital city of Bogotá. On July 27, Colombia's National Health Institute reported 76 official cholera fatalities, and on Aug. 3, admitted to 4,431 probable cases of the disease, and 916 confirmed.

Perhaps most frightening are reports from Peru that a new epidemic of unknown origins is spreading through its jungle regions, in the wake of cholera's ravages. With symptoms similar to those of cholera, the new disease is said to have infected 81 people, of whom 17 have already died.

Juan Aguilar, U.N. health adviser on Ibero-America and the Caribbean, told journalists in Bogotá Aug. 3 that "the war against cholera is not being won." He said that widespread poverty across the continent provided an ideal breeding ground for the disease, and that it was there to stay. Aguilar also predicted that cholera would spread from continent to continent, until the entire planet was infected.