

## Report from Rio by Luis Nava

### Two plagues threatening Brazil

*The spread of cholera and AIDS is turning this South American giant into an African-style catastrophe.*

Over the next few months, Brazil will face an enormous explosion of two forms of plague brought about by International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities: AIDS and cholera. The country's vulnerability, with its precarious public services, widespread malnutrition, and the government's determination to put debt service over the needs of the population, places this South American giant at risk of extermination.

The AIDS threat has become so dramatic that Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello was forced to go on national television Nov. 12 to explain that, according to the most optimistic predictions, there will be approximately 2 million HIV-infected persons in Brazil by the year 2000. Worst-case predictions suggest as many as 8 million! There are currently 21,023 cases of full-blown AIDS, and more than 700,000 HIV-infected people. The pattern is increasingly following that of Africa: In 1986, heterosexuals made up only 5% of total HIV cases, but by 1991 they were 20%.

"Brazil has the potential to become one of the AIDS catastrophes of the world," warned Eduardo Cortes, director of the Brazilian Health Ministry's AIDS program, a year ago. Cortes noted that Brazilian exports could be threatened by such a perception, turning Brazil into a new Haiti or central African country.

The same sentiment was expressed by Michael Merson, director of the World Health Organization's Global AIDS program, in statements to *O Globo* newspaper: "In just two

years, if things continue as they are and if governments do not take precautions, Brazil will be another Africa. In 15 African states, 30% of all adults are infected with AIDS. Brazil is quickly moving in that direction."

Cholera is also contributing to this Africanization process. Diseases like malaria, dengue, and yellow fever could spread to as many as 30 million Brazilians in the wake of a cholera epidemic, said Luiz Otavio Mota Pereira, chairman of the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering. He added that Brazil could lose \$12 billion from such an epidemic, the result of interrupted food exports, collapsed tourism, and a forced dependency on increased imports.

Brazilian authorities knew the cholera bacillus would arrive, but fantasized that despite the limited resources and the socio-economic crisis in the nation, the disease could somehow be kept under control. Such wishful thinking has proven a recipe for disaster. Cholera is no longer centered in the Amazon region, but is fast moving toward the impoverished northeast of the country, where Brazil's largely black population has long been a target of malthusian efforts to shrink population growth. On Nov. 3, the health secretary of Amazonas department Arnaldo Russo warned that cholera would reach the northeast by January 1992: "Within 60 days," he predicted, "the disease will be in the northeast, and from there will go south," to Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro.

The official November Health Ministry bulletin reports 455 cholera

cases and eight deaths in all of Brazil. From April 8, when the first case of cholera in Brazil was reported in the city of Benjamin Constant along the Peruvian border, to October, when 351 cases were reported, seven months elapsed. And yet one month later, the number of cases had risen more than 100, and had left the Amazon for the Atlantic coast, where faster disease transmission belts to the south exist.

On Nov. 28, the first case of cholera in Rio de Janeiro was reported. And what will the cholera bacillus find in Rio? According to Alexander Adler, microbiologist at Rio de Janeiro University, there are more than 1 million residents of the state of Rio without access to potable water. Indeed, the first cholera case was discovered in one of the many slums surrounding the city.

Until now, cholera was under partial control thanks to the relatively moderate winter months. With the advent of spring and summer, the disease is expected to spread rapidly. And despite Health Minister Alcenor Guerra's best efforts, his anti-cholera campaign is being stalemated by political enemies.

As if that weren't enough, the government's suicidal dedication to propitiate the IMF has led to economic stagnation in the country. Unemployment is soaring out of control and consumption levels are falling drastically in a society where whole sectors of the population have long lived under bare subsistence conditions.

It is perhaps no accident that the first cholera case appeared in Rio de Janeiro just as the Federal Health Network went on strike for better wages and working conditions. In some cases, doctors and other health personnel were protesting their inability to work in public hospitals, for lack of medical supplies or adequate staff.