

## Dateline Mexico by Luis Nava and Carlos Cota Meza

### Free trade breeds cholera

*The resurgent cholera epidemic in Mexico turned into "gastroenteritis" on the eve of the NAFTA signing.*

**D**uring August, on the eve of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), all official information regarding the cholera epidemic has suddenly disappeared. Now, according to the Health Ministry, there exists "an epidemic of acute gastroenteritis" in the same states where cholera was spreading only a few weeks ago.

When the epidemic first broke out in Peru last year, Health Secretary Jesús Kumate said there was no possibility that cholera would ever reach Mexico. But on June 17, 1991, the health secretary officially recognized that cholera had indeed arrived in Mexico. The first case was reported in San Miguel Totolmayola, in the state of Mexico, 2,000 meters above sea level and thousands of kilometers from the border with Guatemala or from any seaport, through which the cholera bacillus was expected to enter the country.

The emergency measures adopted by the government were to send health brigades, medicine, and potable water carriers to the small villages affected. Once the summer passed, the government's anti-cholera policy centered around a propaganda campaign designed to convince the population that everything was under administrative control—that is, that all new cases would be reported on a monthly basis.

This atypical arrival of cholera to Mexico was officially attributed to the decision of a suspected drug trafficker to defecate in a river. In 1992, the health authorities were no longer able to blame a new outbreak on some such

clandestine offense. This time, the disease spread more typically.

Last July 3, Guatemala's Health Ministry acknowledged that cholera had gotten out of control in that country: 13,000 ill, 200 dead, and 800,000 asymptomatic carriers.

In Mexico, the campaign against cholera was a total success—until the summer arrived. By June 20 of this year, 4,755 cases were registered since the disease first appeared. Of these, 1,826 cases had appeared in the first six months of 1992, of which 35% (591 cases) corresponded solely to the month of May. In June, the growth rate was 249 cases *per week*.

Until June, the most seriously affected states were those of the south and along the Gulf of Mexico, not accidentally the states where the most economic destruction has been wrought: Veracruz, 292 cases; Tabasco, 206 cases; Yucatán, 208 cases; and Chiapas, along the Guatemalan border and the Pacific Ocean, 155 cases. In Campeche, the disease reached the level of an epidemic, with 760 cases reported for the months of June and July alone, overflowing the capacities of the local social security hospital.

In other states where the disease first showed up last year, the new outbreaks are more severe. In Puebla, 135 cases have been officially recognized, but unofficially they speak of at least 250 cases. Cases of cholera have also appeared in the states of Mexico, Hidalgo, San Luis Potosí, and Tlaxcala; in Guerrero, the health authorities insist that it is not cholera, merely cases of vomiting and diar-

rhea. In Guanajuato, the disease has shown up simultaneously in the cities of León, Silao, and Celaya. In the bordering state of Jalisco, in the city of Guadalajara, 300,000 inhabitants are in danger of contagion, with the aggravating factor being that the center of that center is still devastated by the mysterious explosion of drainage systems. Further to the north, in Nayarit, the bacillus has been detected in the Acaponeta River.

What the government fears most, is that the cholera bacillus will infiltrate the *maquiladora* belt along the northern border—precisely what has now occurred. On June 13, the first case was detected in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. In Tamaulipas state overall, 151 cases have been reported. In Monterrey, Nuevo León, 19 cases have been reported for the months of May and June. In early June, the first case appeared in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, where 85% of the population is considered at a high risk for contagion due to lack of basic sanitation services, according to the Northern Border College. Cases have also appeared in Nogales, Sonora, and in Tijuana, Baja California. In fact, the bacillus is said to have infected the length of the Rio Grande.

The National Epidemiological Institute (INDRE) of Mexico acknowledges that "in the growth curve, one can see a small tendency to rise, unlike previous periods." The figure could actually be much higher, given the tendency to hide cases behind a diagnosis of gastroenteritis and acute diarrhea.

During the first half of 1992, some 1,042,000 cases of diarrheal illnesses were treated. If in Mexico, 3.3 million such conditions are attended yearly and 17,000 die, then "50-plus cholera deaths is not a scandalous figure," said Health Secretary Kumate July 12 to the daily *La Jornada*.