

The IMF Is Killing Mexico With Thirst

by Alberto Vizcarra Osuna

In the Summer of 1982, Mexican President José López Portillo launched the construction of the Fuerte-Mayo Canal in the border area between the northwestern states of Sonora and Sinaloa, for the purpose of reactivating the Water Plan of the Northwest (PLHINO). But ever since then, all succeeding governments have submitted to the fiscal austerity and budget-balancing policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The result has been turning Mexico away from public investment in basic infrastructure and, simultaneously, the suspension of strategic public works for national economic development.

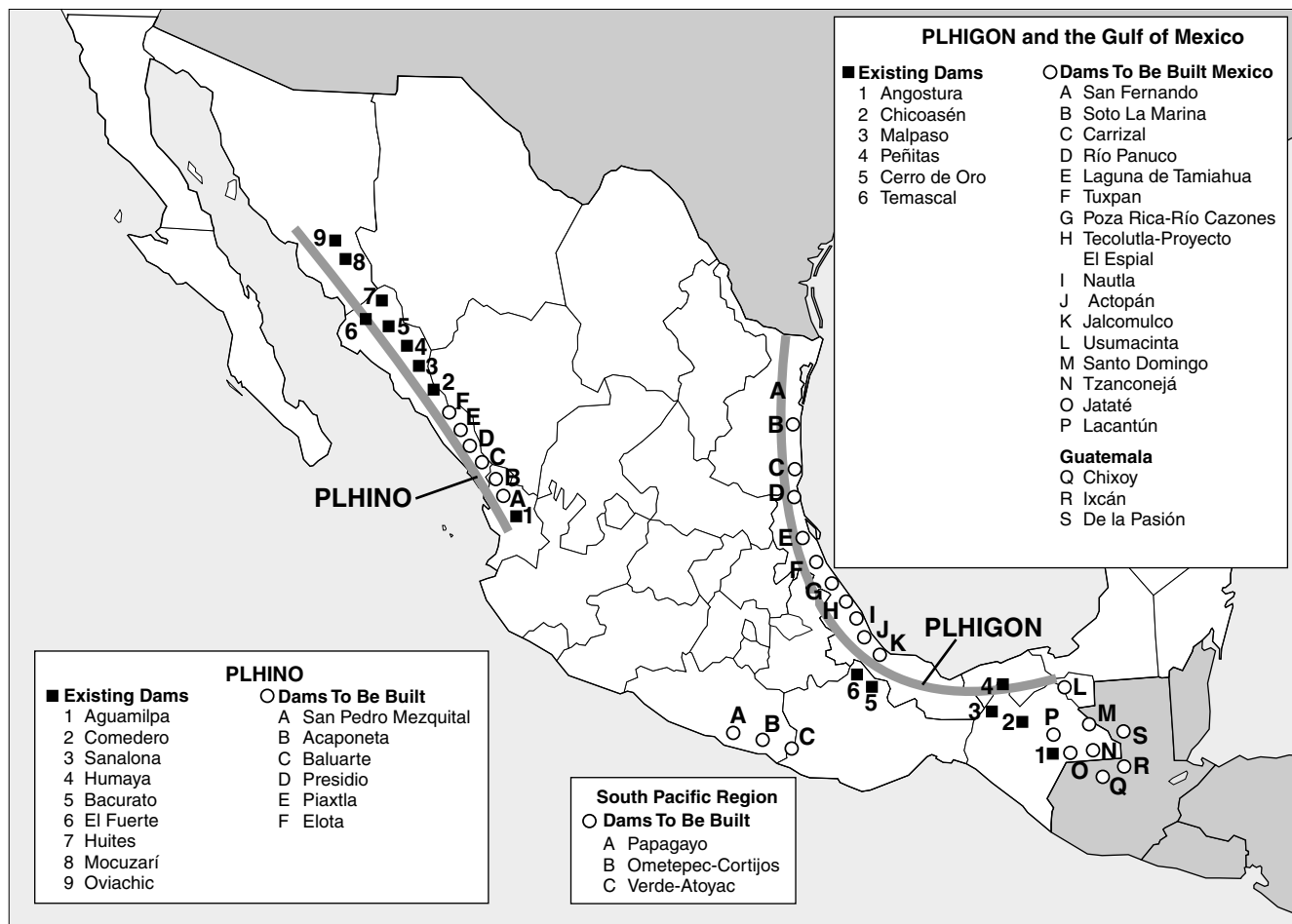
Apart from the Ibero-American Labor Committees, and several growers' organizations like the Permanent Forum of Rural Producers, which have maintained a systematic support of the PLINHO, inspired by the economic concepts of Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., the great majority of government, agricultural, and business institutions in Mexico, along with the political parties, have succumbed to the illusion that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and globalization would guarantee the region's future and the country's economic growth.

Nonetheless, the prolonged drought that has ravaged the states of Sonora, Chihuahua, and the northern part of Sinaloa for more than a decade, leaving hundreds of thousands of hectares parched and fallow, has finally driven many people back to reality, and the PLINHO is once again receiving publicity as a much-needed project, without which there can be no future to the region's—and the country's—plans for food self-sufficiency.

What Really Is the PLHINO?

During the six-year term of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, his government's technocrats rebaptized it the Hydraulic System of the Northwest. The new name was not merely a semantic change. By abandoning the term "Plan" for that of "System," the disease of Salinism killed the original concept of the PLHINO, which was to link the hydroelectric dams, thereby assuring the transfer of surplus water from Nayarit, and southern Sinaloa to the northern lands of that same state and to all of southern Sonora as well. Today, as then, the arguments of these idiots is reducible to the alleged "financial inviability" of the original project. This is the same chorus of fools who faithfully repeat the "analysis" of the World Bank that there will be an inevitable war over water

Mexico: The PLHINO and the PLHIGON



resources, as if this fate were somehow “cheaper” than building the hydraulic infrastructure that would guarantee an adequate supply of the water necessary for Mexico’s economic development.

The PLHINO is part of the planned hydraulic revolution which was formulated as far back as the mid-1960s, under the concept of exploiting the vast quantities of water in the south and southeast of the country, and transferring this water to the huge agricultural regions in northern and northwestern Mexico. This plan embraces practically the entirety of the states of Sonora and Sinaloa, as well as large areas of Chihuahua, Durango, Nayarit, and a small portion of Jalisco state.

The plan was designed as a means of resolving the serious problems stemming from the irregular distribution of water in this vast portion of the national territory, and encompasses the combined control and exploitation of the hydraulic resources of 16 rivers and 7 tributaries, which have a combined annual runoff of 28 million cubic meters (m^3). The PLHINO would also incorporate an annual volume of 1.3 million cubic

meters of underground water, to be administered in combination with surface water.

In its original design, the plan involves a system of reservoirs and canals which originate in the south, in the central area of the state of Nayarit, where the average annual rainfall reaches 1,500 millimeters, and the average annual runoff of the rivers exceeds $300,000 m^3/km^2$ of the basin. Meanwhile, in the north, in the central zone of Sonora, average annual rainfall is barely 150 mm, and runoff is only $6,000 m^3/km^2$, that is, 10 times less precipitation than in the south. Thus, the hydrological potential of the river basins of the south per square kilometer, is 50 times greater than that of the northern rivers. The project was already 30% completed by the early 1980s.

According to studies that have been conducted, the large volumes of surplus water in southern Sinaloa and Nayarit, after satisfying the hydraulic requirements of these zones, would more than meet the long-term water demands of northern Sinaloa and of Sonora, up as far as the Sonora River.

The impact of the prolonged drought, and especially in the irrigation districts of the Yaqui and Mayo valleys in southern Sonora, fulfills the old adage that “Nature is unforgiving.” This aberration of nature dramatically confirms the lunacy of having subjected ourselves unconditionally to free-trade policies, which have defined the agricultural zones of the country—in particular, those with a vast potential to produce basic cereals—as “non-strategic zones.” These policies, in effect, state that it is cheaper to import grain than it is to produce it. In this same vein, the World Bank has indicated that, given the shortage of water, priority should be given in northern Mexico to supplying the *maquiladoras* (foreign-owned assembly plants), rather than to agriculture!

As a result of the drought, these two once-fertile valleys have stopped sowing nearly 200,000 of their combined 300,000 hectares. There have been attempts to ameliorate this disaster by drilling wells to extract water from the subsoil, but the cost of electricity, added to the hyperinflated costs of other inputs, and added to the free-trade policy toward prices, have made the sowing of crops such as wheat and corn financially unviable. In the case of Yaqui Valley, the area of corn planned to be under pump irrigation for the next planting cycle will not even reach 12,000 hectares. In general terms, the estimates are that, during the October 2004-September 2005 farming cycle, farmers will scarcely be able to sow 40,000 hectares with free-flowing water, and perhaps a similar amount with pumped water. That is, only some 80,000 of the 220,000 hectares in the Yaqui Valley.

This situation has left the region in a deep economic depression, since all economic activities center around the primary agricultural sector. Poverty and unemployment have grown dramatically. The drought has scourged an agricultural sector which is already crushed by policies which, in the past 20 years, have stripped away all mechanisms of protection, in particular, guaranteed prices. The impotent response of the Federal government has been limited to offering miserable crumbs of assistance, in the form of so-called marketing support and the program Procampo—aid which will disappear in 2005 in any case, under the NAFTA agreement.

The Return to Reality

Given this situation, members of the Permanent Forum of Rural Producers (FPPR) and the International Caucus of Labor Committees (ICLC), since May 2003, have been intensifying their campaign to re-launch the great hydraulic infrastructure projects, among these the great Mexico-U.S. cross-border projects such as the proposed North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA), which would provide vast quantities of water to the region of the Great American Desert, supplying more than 12 million m³ of water from Arizona to northern Sonora, through a canal that would connect the Fronteras River to the Yaqui River basin. Thus, Sonora would receive water from the south through PLHINO, and from the north through NAWAPA.

Since the beginning of 2004, the press has been reporting on this mobilization of the FPPR and ICLC in Sonora for these proposals, in particular for the completion of the PLHINO, which other producer organizations have also adopted. For example, in a recent meeting with Secretary of Agriculture Javier Usabiaga, the president of the Farmer Alliance of the Northwest, former Federal Deputy Juan Leyva Méndivil, demanded that the drought be addressed by finishing the PLHINO. This same argument was made by Sen. Carlos Vilalobos Organista, as well as by organized merchants and presidents of farmer organizations in southern Sonora.

From this spreading mobilization has emerged a document, addressed to the governor of Sonora state, Eduardo Bours Castelo, which proposes the reactivation and economic reconstruction of the region, with the completion of the PLHINO has the centerpiece. The document was approved by the Association of Agricultural Organizations of Southern Sonora—which incorporates all the private federations of growers—as well as the Principal Marketing Committee, the Union of Rural Producer Societies of Southern Sonora, the Farmer Alliance of the Northwest, the Agricultural Credit Union of the Yaqui River, the Association of Insurance Funds of Sonora State, the National Union of Farmer Organizations, and the Association of Users of the Yaqui River Irrigation District.

In this document, all of these organizations recognize the fact that the existing hydraulic infrastructure of the Yaqui River basin has already completed its cycle of capitalization, and that the existing hydraulic works along the Pacific Coast were originally conceived as part of the PLHINO. The document concludes that, by admitting that the economic development of Sonora will have no future without water, “we must therefore recognize that the fight to finish the PLHINO is a matter of existential survival.”

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