

Peru cholera epidemic threatens continent

by Valerie Rush

Cholera is now infecting Peruvians at the rate of 2,000 per day, double the rate reported by the Health Ministry only five days earlier, and as the epidemic approaches its fourth week, more than 22,500 victims have been treated at hospitals. Tens of thousands more go untreated in the shantytowns that surround Lima and other port cities, and in inhospitable, guerrilla-infested jungle regions of the country. Peru has become the first Western Hemisphere focus of a cholera pandemic which experts say first surfaced in Indonesia in 1936, and has taken 55 years to cross the Atlantic. A continent-wide pandemic is now being forecast.

Peruvians can thank the International Monetary Fund and their own successive governments for the distinction of being the first Western host to the disease in a half-century. According to a spokesman for the Peruvian branch of the Club of Life, an international pro-life group founded by Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the Peruvian government's failure to resist the murderous austerity conditions imposed by the international financial community has created a social and economic holocaust in Peru which "makes cholera the first wave of many epidemics."

In forums, radio programs, and press interviews, the Club of Life has charged, "These epidemics are caused by the hunger brought on by the programs of the International Monetary Fund. The effects of these policies are fully known by those who are implementing them. This is part of the plan being implemented by the malthusian oligarchy to reduce Third World populations. Not to declare a national emergency and to rebuild Peruvians' living conditions is to condemn a penniless population to death."

A cold-blooded President Alberto Fujimori has responded to the situation by announcing plans for a further turn of the austerity screw. In response to pressures from Washington, he has appointed a new cabinet which heralds a worsening of the breakdown crisis which made Peru the choice breeding ground for the cholera bacillus in the first place. In particular, he has imposed a new finance minister even more committed to exterminating state protection for the economy and for the population than his predecessor.

Minister Carlos Boloña was welcomed with open arms

by the U.S. financial community's flagship newspaper the *Wall Street Journal* and by the ultra-monetarist Peruvian daily *Expreso*, which wrote that Boloña was more of a "hard-liner" than his predecessor, and would therefore find "official Washington's doors open to him."

A protégé of George Bush's favorite economist, the pro-drug Hernando de Soto, Boloña is also sponsored by former Peruvian Finance Minister Carlos Rodríguez Pastor, a Wells Fargo banker for whom Boloña served as vice minister in 1980-85. The Peruvian economy is thus placed under the control of a neo-liberal bankers' agent who has suggested basing Peru's credit system on an influx of legalized cocaine dollars. Boloña has already announced that he would stick to the President's austerity program, known as "Fuji-shock," but that he intended to make it "more efficient."

From panic to pandemic

The Fujimori government is trying to control the panic over the cholera contagion by insisting that the pace of infection is slowing thanks to the use of simple, cheap, and effective medical treatment and the deployment of several hundred doctors and nurses into rural Peru with oral rehydration kits. The fact remains, however, that due to the virtual non-existence of potable water sources, sanitation services, and hygienic education in the Peruvian countryside and urban ghettos, the spread of the disease has far outpaced treatment. According to the Feb. 21 *Washington Times*, "In one shantytown outside Lima, reporters watched housewives scoop up drinking water from stagnant ditches along the Rimac River. Health authorities had warned that the river was infected with cholera from sewage. The women said they had no other source of water." Relief workers, meanwhile, are expressing concern about gaining access to jungle areas where the drug-trafficking Shining Path guerrillas maintain a reign of terror. The epidemic is thus not only rapidly spreading across Peru, but, according to cholera expert André Dodin at the Pasteur Institute in France, can be expected to sweep the destitute Ibero-American continent within months.

Peru has already been placed under virtual quarantine by its frightened neighbors, with several countries considering closing their borders altogether. Imports of many Peruvian products have virtually ceased, and the United States and several countries in Europe have begun to cancel vital contracts for fish and related imports. France, which is a major purchaser of Peruvian fish-meal, has suspended those purchases, and Peruvian businessmen are warning that the toll on the economy could prove disastrous. The Peruvian Export Association estimates that the country could lose \$100 million over the next four months.

On Feb. 15, Dodin told the Agence France Presse, "The epidemic is going to affect all of Latin America. The measures adopted by the Latin American governments will limit the consequences of the epidemic, but cannot prevent it."