

Dateline Mexico by Carlos Méndez

Salinas unleashes 'oil cholera'

As if he were the Queen of Hearts, Salinas is lopping off the head of anyone who dares to discuss Mexico's oil.

The most deadly disease currently affecting officials of Carlos Salinas de Gortari's government has come to be known as "oil cholera," and the contagion appears to be spreading. "Oil cholera" attacks anyone who speaks—without presidential permission—about Mexican oil in connection with the Free Trade Pact the Salinas government is now negotiating with the U.S., and it forces its victims to resign immediately.

The breeding ground for this infection lies in the intense U.S. pressure on Mexico to include its oil in the Free Trade Pact. Foreign involvement with Mexican oil is strictly prohibited by the Mexican Constitution, and any alteration of the Constitution to accommodate Bush's planned annexation of Mexico's economy, and especially its vast oil wealth, would trigger widespread opposition inside Mexico—that is, as long as such changes were attempted in plain view. Those who would surrender the oil, understandably, are acting *sotto voce*.

There is widespread suspicion among Mexican circles that the "oil cholera" was brought to Mexico by former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who declared, following his Feb. 8 meeting with Salinas, that the incorporation of Mexico's oil into the Free Trade Pact "needn't require changing your Constitution; there are many ways in which we could reach a deal." In other words, we'll get your oil, one way or the other.

Kissinger's suggestion of circumventing the Mexican Constitution confirms these suspicions of what transpired behind closed doors during

Salinas's late-November 1990 marathon meetings on the Free Trade Pact with Bush. Salinas repeatedly emerged from those meetings denying that Mexican oil was a subject for negotiation. And yet the word on everyone's lips at the time was that Bush was after one and only one thing, Mexico's oil, *and that he got it!*

The weekly magazine *Siempre* observed in its Feb. 7 editorial, "Despite the fact that Article 27 of the Constitution is still in force, the truth is that behind doors and in corners, in whispers and in private, the possibility of privatizing *Petróleos Mexicanos* [Pemex] is being discussed."

The first symptoms of the "oil cholera" were revealed Jan. 18 when *La Jornada* columnist Alberto Barranco Chavarria wrote that "for the purpose of avoiding distortions, exaggerations, or misinterpretations about the repercussions of the Persian Gulf war on our country, the highest office in the country has ordered that the only spokesman . . . on oil matters is Pemex General Director Francisco Rojas." And on Feb. 7, *El Economista* director Luis E. Mercado wrote that the only ones permitted to speak about oil and the Free Trade Pact are "Trade Secretary Jaime Serra Puche; head of the Office of Negotiations Herminio Alonso Blanco Mendoza; and the coordinator of that same office Jaime Enrique Zabludovsky Kuper. Those not mentioned 'are out!'"

The order to shut up has also been extended to congressmen of the ruling PRI party, all of whom have reportedly been fitted with a "muzzle," according to Jorge Alcocer in the maga-

zine *Proceso* of Feb. 11.

But in a "democratic" country like Mexico, some officials have made the mistake of believing they were inoculated against the "oil cholera." On Feb. 5, a communiqué issued by the office of the President announced the resignation of the Deputy Secretary of Energy, Mines, and State Industry (SEMIP), engineer Alberto Escofet Artigas, who a few days earlier had declared that "there will be private and foreign investment in oil and electricity."

On Feb. 14, the press reported another victim of the "oil cholera": Miguel Angel Toro Hernández, director of international trade negotiations for Mexico's Commerce and Industrial Development Department (SECOFI). Toro Hernández resigned after declaring that oil would indeed be included, "within the constraints of law," in the Free Trade Pact.

According to *El Economista* director Mercado, two delegates of SECOFI, from Pueblo and Chihuahua, have already resigned after committing the same sin.

Following these outbreaks of "oil cholera," President Salinas held a private meeting Feb. 11 with Sen. Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, former Mexican ambassador to the U.N. and co-founder, along with Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Despite a cautious disavowal by Cárdenas that the moment was not propitious for a dialogue with the government, the Muñoz Ledo meeting with Salinas went ahead, and has been widely viewed as a willingness to give credibility to the Salinas government by at least one faction of the PRD. In statements afterwards, Muñoz Ledo admitted that Mexico's oil policy and the ramifications of the Persian Gulf war on Mexico were central aspects of his amicable "chat" with the President.