

Menem admits cholera has hit Argentina

by Mary Cabanillas

In November 1991, Argentina's press reported on the first cases of cholera in the country, which appeared primarily in the northern provinces of Salta and Jujuy. The government of President Carlos Menem took the approach of denying the existence of any cholera cases, and of prohibiting health authorities from making any statements on the matter. The coverup went so far as to set up police cordons around hospital centers where the cholera victims were being treated.

In early February, when the cholera contagion was no longer containable, the communications media began to apply pressure to force out the truth. Finally, on Feb. 6, a desperate telephone call was made to the Buenos Aires daily *Clarín* by Guillermo Lorente, director of a hospital in Tartagal, Salta, saying that "at five in the morning, we were told from [the city of] Salta that the specimens taken at Santa Victoria were positive, disproving our own results. Thus I am authorized to give out the official information."

That same day, the Menem government officially admitted that "cholera has arrived in Argentina." Health Minister Julio César Araoz announced that 45 cases of cholera had been confirmed, of which six had already died; all were on the outskirts of the city of Salta, in the province of the same name bordering Bolivia. The disease has now reached Buenos Aires, a city of 8 million.

As in other countries on the continent, cholera appeared first in some of the most impoverished areas of Argentina, known as Santa Maria, Santa Victoria, and Misión de Paz—all in Salta province. The inhabitants of these towns are primitive Indians who speak no Spanish, and who live by hunting, fishing, and gathering. They are totally isolated from the media. The nearest hospital is 200 kilometers away, and they lack the most essential services. The Indians live along the banks of the Pilcomayo River, from which they derive their primary sustenance, fish. There is a good likelihood that the cholera contagion came from that fish.

The Pilcomayo River converges on the Bermejo River, which in turn empties into the Paraná River, which is a tributary of the Río de La Plata. It is along the La Plata's banks where urban centers desperately lacking in the most elementary water treatment and sewage facilities are based.

According to the Argentine Statistical Institute (INDEC), Corrientes province has less than 50% potable water and less than 15% sewage facilities. The province of Santa Fé has 55% potable water and 32% sewage. In the nearby province of Entre Ríos, 40.6% have no potable water and 78.2% no sewage. It is worth noting that the La Plata and Paraná rivers are Argentina's main waterways. Thus, the ideal conditions exist for a rapid and dangerous spread of the epidemic downstream, toward Buenos Aires.

Following the "official" admission of cholera in Argentina, 187 cases of the disease were confirmed in the course of the following week, of which 11 were fatal. The deadly bacillus has continued to spread from town to neighboring town in the affected regions, despite rigorous sanitation measures ordered by the Health Ministry, again suggesting transmission by river.

Now in Buenos Aires

When the cholera cases in Salta and Jujuy were first officially acknowledged, Buenos Aires province Health Minister José Pampuro predicted that cholera would reach Buenos Aires within the month. His statements were dubbed "ill-advised" and "alarmist" by the federal government. And yet, on Feb. 18, all of Argentina's dailies carried the report that a case of cholera had been confirmed in Greater Buenos Aires, in the industrial belt surrounding the capital city. The 34-year-old middle-class mother of seven children was infected with a different cholera bacillus than that which has affected Salta and Jujuy.

The situation in Buenos Aires is critical. According to INDEC, 52.1% of the population lacks potable water, and 22.3% lack sewage. The president of the Argentine Epidemiology Society Dr. Carlos Ferreyra Nuñez, warned the daily *Clarín* that controlling the disease in Greater Buenos Aires "will be difficult, because all the conditions for the disease's advance are there: lack of potable water, vegetables watered with feces-contaminated water, inadequate control of food quality, and malnourished inhabitants."

But the coverup continues. During a recent visit to Spain, President Menem declared that "there is not an epidemic of cholera in Argentina, but an outbreak, and it is totally localized. If nothing happens, it will disappear in short order." While the head of state expresses this optimism, the heads of Argentina's provinces—confronted with new reforms of the national budget which have decentralized health and education resources—are increasingly alarmed at the lack of funds available to check the advance of the epidemic.

Dr. Antonio Bonifasi, president of the Federal Council of Potable Water and Sanitation, declared last October that "the sector which once headed up Latin American statistics on provision of potable water and sewage, is now in critical condition. This is due to major disinvestment in the sector. At least \$300-400 million a year should be invested in this area, but the country last year invested only \$70 million."