

Report from Rio by Lorenzo Carrasco

Collor sinks deeper into disrepute

Rumors are flying that the President has AIDS, as an angry citizenry vents its spleen against his brutal policies.

President Fernando Collor de Mello's sudden weight loss of more than 22 pounds has sent a wave of rumors reverberating throughout Brazil.

At the beginning of February, the announcement that President Collor had suspended his daily routine of going out to meet citizens waiting for him on the ramp of the Plan Alto presidential palace in Brasilia—a suspension announced just hours after the attempted military coup in Venezuela—was the fuse which lit a new round of rumors that the President was gravely ill, requiring intestinal surgery.

Days later, the issue of the President's health took on greater proportions when the *Agência Estado*, which publishes the daily *O Estado de São Paulo*, reported in the morning edition that the President required an urgent life-saving operation. This caused the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo stock markets to plunge drastically by seven percentage points, which in turn ripped to shreds the great expectation of a continuing stock market boom which the government had managed to pump up through privatization programs and promises of economic success made to international bankers.

But even more grave were comments made by eminent epidemiologist Ricardo Veronesi to a group of journalists in front of the Albert Einstein Hospital in São Paulo on Feb. 6, who had gathered to await news on the failing health of former President Janio Quadros. When commenting on President Collor's health, Veronesi mentioned that a rumor was circulating that Claudia Raia, a famous ac-

trix very close to President Collor, had AIDS.

Despite the fact that his comment had been off the record, days later, it exploded into a major press scandal when *Jornal do Brasil* used its lead editorial Feb. 12 to attack Dr. Veronesi as responsible for the spread of the rumors against the President.

"Claudia Raia—who was obviously overweight and lost weight in order to be able to dance—has initiated two suits for damages and losses, charging a crime against her honor, in the civilian and criminal courts of São Paulo. Another action should be opened in the Regional Medicine Council of São Paulo," the paper wrote.

Claudia Raia later showed the national press the negative results of an AIDS test.

Veronesi replied, "I only commented on what everyone is saying: that Claudia Raia had AIDS, and that President Collor, who is very good friends with her, also had the disease. . . . Claudia Raia's show is a failure; she's having financial difficulties, and she wants to get attention by trampling on me."

This rumor can be heard all over the country, as all levels of Brazilian society use it to jeer at President Collor. President George Bush, it is worth remembering, had gushed that Collor is "my kind of guy" when he visited Washington, D.C. last year. Two months ago, things went so far that a journalist asked Collor directly if he had AIDS at a press conference.

The rumors gained credibility because of such things as the earlier

scandalous affair between two cabinet ministers, Economics Minister Zelia Cardoso de Mello and Justice Minister Bernardo Cabral. Cabral used cabinet meetings to send flirty little notes under the table to the woman he was courting, who was in charge at the time of imposing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) cruel economic measures upon her countrymen.

The book then published by the former minister, which detailed her love affairs, soon became a bestseller, providing Brazilians with a snapshot of the climate of corruption in which the Collor government is embedded.

Nothing is more symptomatic of the lack of credibility and disrepute into which the Collor government has fallen in the eyes of Brazilian society than the credence given the AIDS rumor. This is the silent revenge of a population which feels defrauded by so many false promises given during the presidential election campaign, while today the country faces institutional chaos, high inflation, salary cuts, and increasing unemployment, all provoked by the policies of economic destruction dictated by IMF technocrats and obediently implemented by Collor's ministers.

Backing this, a poll commissioned by the government from the Vox Populi Institute (which is headed by the son of Collor's brother-in-law, Amb. Marcos Coimbra) demonstrated that the popular rejection of the Collor administration is no longer restricted to the state capitals, but has now swept the entire country. Although no statistics were cited, the outcome, published by *O Globo* on Feb. 10, confirms previous polls carried out in state capitals, which indicate levels of rejection of the Collor government surpassing 80%.

Any similarity with Venezuela is not mere coincidence.