

The IMF caused the floods in Mexico

by Ignacio Mondaca

Viewed by Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo as “the tragedy of the decade,” the seasonal flooding that has inundated Mexico has turned five states into a disaster zone. The devastation of the affected region, which embraces about 20% of the national territory, exposes the severe lack of water-control infrastructure, and Mexico’s helplessness in the face of natural phenomena, largely because of the austerity policies and budget cutbacks imposed on this country by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1982. The national emergency notwithstanding, the only thing that Mexico’s rulers are proposing is the continued extraction of more wealth from the exhausted physical economy, to pay the ever-mounting foreign debt.

Flooding in the Southeast-Gulf region of Mexico has totally or partially destroyed 173 towns in the states of Veracruz, Puebla, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, and Tabasco. In Villahermosa, capital city of Tabasco, the floods affected 70% of the city, leaving nearly 200,000 people stranded; so far, the government has acknowledged a total of nearly 400,000 disaster victims and 400 deaths due to flooding and mudslides. However, the official tally does not include the hundreds of thousands of peasant families who lost their crops, and whose croplands will take at least a year to be rehabilitated.

The damage inflicted on highways, bridges, canals, rail lines, electricity towers and lines, potable water systems, communications networks, and other infrastructure is already incalculable. According to the slanted estimates of the National Institute of Statistics and the Finance Ministry, damage thus far adds up to \$2 billion, a ridiculous underestimate. Their own calculations admit that the government’s meager Natural Disaster Fund, containing some \$270 million, will only allow for the reconstruction of 27% of the affected roads and highways.

The disastrous situation facing the area afflicted by flooding is matched by the no less dramatic circumstances facing the states of Mexico’s northern region: Zacatecas, Durango, Coahuila, and San Luis Potosí have been razed by a drought which is now in its sixth year, and which has turned what were once major farmlands into barren desert, and hundreds of farm communities into ghost towns. The emigration of thousands of Mexicans to the United States is one of the symptoms of this phenomenon.

In Veracruz, nearly 300,000 hectares have been afflicted: corn, beans, coffee, citrus, banana, papaya, sugarcane, rice, and forage crops have been largely lost. Cattlemen are reporting multimillion-dollar losses.

In Tabasco, 26,000 tons of banana were lost, 30,000 hectares of perennial crops were entirely lost, one-fourth of 65,000 hectares of corn suffered total or partial losses, 248,000 hectares dedicated to pig-farming were flooded, and so on.

In Puebla and Hidalgo, damage to agriculture was similar. The Necaxa Dam in Puebla was on the verge of bursting, forcing the opening of the spillways as a last resort; the flooding wiped out the towns of Zihuateutla, Patla, Chicontla, Cahuatlón, and Tlulantongo, and destroyed part of the towns of Gutiérrez Zamora and Tecolutla in Veracruz. The reservoir of Tenango, also in Puebla, which was storing 43 million cubic meters of water, suffered fissures, which now threaten the town of Tenango de las Flores.

In Tabasco, the enormous Peñitas Dam, an important element in the hydroelectric complex of southeastern Mexico, had to open its spillways when its capacity overflowed, contributing to the flooding of five townships, including the capital city of Villahermosa.

Ever since 1975, the LaRouche movement in Mexico has urged in its economic platform the necessity of developing major water-management infrastructure projects, which would have prevented much of the current crisis.

The development of the Water Plan of the Northeast and the Water Plan of the Northern Gulf, whose main thrust is to take advantage of the substantial surplus water runoff which occurs in the south and southeast of the country, by channeling it toward the fertile northern states through a nationally interconnected network, represents the only real solution to the foreseeable assaults of nature, as well as to meet the national demand for water, for both production and consumption.

However, starting with the imposition of the IMF’s genocidal prescriptions in 1982, the governments of Miguel de la Madrid, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and Ernesto Zedillo buried aspirations for the sovereign industrial development of the country, and followed the neo-liberal, globalist prescriptions to the letter. Ruled by the dictates of the “free market,” these governments auctioned off the greater part of state industry, dismantled national industry, ruined agricultural production, dismantled the national credit system, and, over the years, turned the country into a paradise for speculation. The effects are now evident in the unemployment, reduced living standards, massive migration, and growth of the so-called “informal economy.”

Natural disasters, poverty march together

On the world scale, 90% of natural disasters occur in poor countries lacking in development and in urban and infrastructural development. In Mexico, this is clearly the case.

The sequels to the recent earthquake in Oaxaca, the torrential rains and prolonged drought, affect 508 of the country’s

municipalities; the majority of them figure prominently on the map of poverty and extreme poverty in Mexico. According to information from the ministries of Agriculture, Government, and Social Development, the geographies of Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Puebla, Tabasco, Veracruz, Durango, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas, which are suffering the inclemencies of natural disasters, overlap the shaded zone on the map of poverty. Three hundred and sixty-five of those municipalities form part of the Program of Attention to Priority Regions, an aid program that operates in geographic areas classified by their scarce or nonexistent infrastructure, deficient health and education systems, and lack of productive capacity. In Puebla, for example, of 89 affected municipalities, 83 appear on the list of extreme poverty, and 55 of these have primarily Indian inhabitants.

The “tragedy of the decade” has brought to the five states affected by the floods yet another complication: epidemic outbreaks and other health problems. The government has been forced to decree a health emergency because of the risk of outbreaks of cholera, malaria, and dengue fever, while health problems related to the constant humidity, such as micosis and respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses, are beginning to rapidly spread.

In the north of the country, dengue fever has begun to cause devastation. In Monterrey, capital of the industrial state of Nuevo León, strong summer rains have caused rivers to overflow, leading to severe flooding in various parts of the city. The inadequacies of preventive measures, especially the lack of an adequate rainwater drainage system, stand exposed. Stagnant waters have turned into reservoirs for the *Aedes egypti* mosquito, which transmits dengue fever.

In September, an outbreak of dengue was registered in Monterrey and several contiguous municipalities. In late October, the states of Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua were already reporting outbreaks of the epidemic.

In two months, the number of cases of classic dengue fever officially acknowledged by Nuevo León health authorities surpassed 5,800. Several hundred became infected with the more deadly dengue hemorrhagic fever (DHF), and dozens of deaths have already been reported.

Save the butterflies, not the humans!

The Nuevo León government, headed by National Action Party (PAN) Gov. Fernando Canales Clariond, has demonstrated its colossal incompetence in the face of the epidemic. Canales’s health secretary, Dr. Jesús Zacarías, first tried to hide the gravity of the situation, and then tried to eliminate the mosquito vector with a fly swatter. In answer to the proposal of a farsighted citizen, who urged free aerial fumigations in the metropolitan area of Monterrey, as has been done in New York City against the mosquito-borne West Nile encephalitis. Dr. Zacarías offered the singular argument that this “could kill the butterflies . . . also the swallows” and “could damage the paint on cars.” Thus stood exposed the bare face

of the genocidal policy of neo-PANistas like Canales Clariond and PAN Presidential candidate Vicente Fox.

The Ibero-American Solidarity Movement (MSIA), followers of the ideas of Lyndon LaRouche, launched an immediate campaign in Nuevo León, denouncing the genocidal framework presented by the state government. Dr. Zacarías responded that the disinfectant campaign being carried out by the government, using a miserable station wagon, “is the program of the World Health Organization, not of Jesús Zacarías”—but which, he confessed, “doesn’t seek eradication.”

Through Nuevo León radio and television and mass distribution of leaflets, the MSIA orchestrated an effective campaign which rapidly won the sympathy of the population. María Luisa Gómez del Campo, spokeswoman for the MSIA in the state, whose husband had become infected with dengue, questioned the government’s strategy, and issued a call for implementation of classical measures of eradication. She denounced the effects on health and the economy being caused by IMF-imposed budget cutbacks, and proposed taking up again “the great projects” of infrastructure and development, to eradicate diseases, such as cholera, malaria, dengue, and leprosy, that have once again begun to appear in Mexico.

Paying the debt at any cost

Faced with this national emergency, Mexico’s elite are intent on continuing the looting of the country instead of improving the living conditions of their fellow-citizens. The priority, both for Canales Clariond, as for Finance Minister José Angel Gurría Treviño, is to save financial costs while squeezing wealth from the collapsed physical economy and from the living standards of the population, in order to meet the sacrosanct demands of the bankers for payment of the debt.

Gurría Treviño is now desperately seeking fresh infusions of capital from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, to fill the enormous black hole represented by the bankrupt Mexican banking system, a microcosm of the dying international financial system. Between 1999 and the year 2000, the Mexican government hopes to inject the equivalent of \$7 billion to save private banking in the country, and to avoid “the continued accumulation of interest,” that is, triple what they supposedly plan to invest in reconstruction caused by the disasters.

While the Finance Minister continues to ponder how to save the banks, some in the Mexican Senate have begun to echo the proposal of Pope John Paul II, to forgive the debts of the poorest countries. Mexico is in position to impose a debt moratorium, and to orient its resources into sovereign reconstruction instead of debt repayment.

On the eve of the year 2000 Presidential elections, neither the opposition candidates nor the pre-candidates of the ruling PRI party have offered any programmatic solutions to the disaster. The reason is, they have none.