

Lopez Portillo takes a pro-nuclear stand

by Dolia Pettingell

"I believe that the 21st Century will be the nuclear century. As soon as the problems are overcome, and it seems to me that they are extremely exaggerated by the defenders of the environment, there will be no choice but nuclear," Mexican President José Lopez Portillo told the French daily *Le Monde* on the eve of his European trip. This statement, and the reiteration of the same idea in a press conference a few days later, are the strongest statements to date from the Mexican president committing his country to a course of energy development which centers on nuclear power. It also constitutes the first, precise definition of the content of his "global energy proposal" presented to the United Nations in September 1979. Since its first presentation—which López Portillo left deliberately vague—there have been extensive polemics both inside and outside Mexico between those who favor Club of Rome-style "soft technologies," and those who see nuclear power as the fundamental solution to the world energy crisis. Now López Portillo has come firmly down on the side of the latter faction.

López Portillo backed up his strengthened verbal commitment to nuclear energy by also making it one of the central topics of his discussion with the heads of state he is visiting. Significantly, he will be touring three of the major countries—Sweden, France, and Canada—that have made nuclear offers to Mexico. In fact, the entire trip has been viewed by some observers as a virtual "shopping trip" for nuclear technology.

The Mexican government recently commissioned nuclear feasibility studies from companies in several countries—including the three mentioned above. The French company Sofratome released a study stating that Mexico was in a very "good position" to go ahead with the major nuclear program it plans to carry out between 1990 and 2015. Mexico plans to bring on line 2-3 900-MW units a year between 1990 and 2000, 3 per year over the next decade, and four yearly after the year 2010, according to Sofratome.

The French leg of the Mexican president's trip is viewed as particularly important from the nuclear stand-

point. According to press reports, France has offered Mexico "all the reactors it wants," and Mexico is reportedly already sharing French know-how from the "Phoenix" breeder reactor. Mexican-French cooperation in the nuclear field dates from Giscard d'Estaing's historic visit to Mexico City in February of 1979, at which point a number of training and other projects were agreed to.

The specific deals agreed to between Mexico and France on this trip are limited, and involve only training Mexican nuclear technicians in France and joint exploration for uranium in Mexico. Before and during the trip there were rumors that further accords would be reached on French help in the construction of nuclear plants in Mexico, and on uranium enrichment. Nothing was agreed to publicly on these points, although a very positive political climate was established within which further agreements are likely.

The Mexican government was forced to respond to the widespread rumor-mongering in the Mexican and European press that extensive deals with France were about to be signed. Industry Minister de Oteyza told the press that all reports published so far on Mexican purchases of nuclear plants were "pure fantasy," and that Mexico would reach no final decisions on the matter until all offers from the rest of the trip had been fully analyzed back in Mexico.

Mexico's nuclear program

The beginnings of the Mexican nuclear program date back, as they do in numerous developing sector countries, to the period of the Atoms for Peace program of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

This introduced training and research facilities in the country.

In 1964, as noted by the Mexican daily *The News* this week, it was French President Charles de Gaulle who brought with him a proposal for the first commercial nuclear reactor on his Mexican state visit. The timing worked against the idea, however. Mexican President Adolfo López Mateos was at the end of his term and incoming president Díaz Ordaz did not move strongly on the project.

It fell to then-Federal Electricity Commission director José Lopez Portillo in the early 1970s, under Luis Echeverría, to take the plunge and begin the construction of commercial reactors. These were the twin Laguna Verde light water plants on the Veracruz coast, each 650 MW. The technology was contracted through the U.S. firms GE and Westinghouse, with Ebasco participation on the construction management side.

Delays slowed construction to a crawl, until in 1977 Lopez Portillo, as President, ordered a priority effort to

complete the project. Inauguration is now slated for late 1982.

Simultaneously López Portillo mandated a sweeping upgrading of the infrastructure of the Mexican nuclear effort, under the direction of Mexican Nuclear Energy Institute chief Francisco Vizcaino Murray. The result was the 1979 nuclear energy law which established an enhanced research and training capability and a separate entity charged with locating, mining, and refining Mexico's hefty uranium reserves—Uramex.

During the same years the government officially adopted the goal of 20 nuclear reactors by the year 2000, and began preliminary work on siting for the first units.

Political problems with U.S.

With the stage thus set, the question of actually signing the contracts for the next plants has been subject to acute political pressures both within and outside the country.

Within the country, there has been considerable debate over whether to proceed with the Canadians' heavy

water CANDU reactors—alleged by the left to be the more “nationalist” course—or French light water reactors. Environmentalists and other antigrowth forces have argued nuclear is not necessary at all because of Mexico's enormous oil reserves.

Outside the country, Mexico faces unremitting hostility from the United States. James Schlesinger unilaterally embargoed deliveries of enriched uranium to Mexico in January 1978, imperiling the Laguna Verde construction timetable. The deliveries were only resumed a year later when López Portillo and Giscard included a clause in their March 1979 joint communiqué threatening that France would make good on any deliveries sabotaged by Washington.

The depths of the continuing Mexican distrust of American motives and interests was shown in the midst of the European trip as recently as last week. Emerging from a private meeting with U.S. energy secretary Duncan in Paris, Pemex director Jorge Díaz Serrano instructed a spokesman to make clear that “any bilateral, regional or continental criterion is inadequate to provide effective solutions to the energy crisis of our times.”

‘The 21st century: The nuclear century’

Lopez Portillo made the following statement to Le Monde May 16 before departing for France.

Nuclear energy is a question which we want to link with the world energy plan we proposed: take advantage of the time before oil runs out—fortunately in our case that is a very long time—in order to move into a new epoch; and I believe that the 21st Century will be the nuclear century. As soon as the problems are overcome, and it seems to me that they are extremely exaggerated by the defenders of the environment, there will be no choice but nuclear.

At a press conference in Paris, May 17, the Mexican president was asked about nuclear agreements with France.

We have not signed any contracts. We have agreed to study relations in this energy field which Mexico is

considering with great interest, both for our own development and as an aspect of the world energy plan ... which is based on the need to prepare the transition from the petroleum age to the age of other energy sources which will replace it, the most important of which is evidently nuclear.

Mexico, which five years ago imported oil and decided to build nuclear electric installations, now is sure of the advantages obtained from bringing in technologies, and naturally we are interested in what France offers, but we are also open to other countries. ... We judge that large-scale projects must necessarily use enriched uranium. We believe that large-scale projects must necessarily use enriched uranium as things now stand; less ambitious projects, boiling water.

And I will visit Canada, and I'm sure we'll discuss these things there. Mexico is thinking that in the immediate future, during the next few decades, superior technologies will certainly be developed—they are now being worked on in the laboratories and are approaching commercial feasibility; ... industrial-level applications are being studied. Mexico is interested in obtaining these technologies ... and is signing agreements to do so with the countries having them.