

# Ibero-America faces AIDS holocaust

by Peter Rush

"If HIV-1 infection [AIDS] continues to penetrate the poor and less advantaged populations of Latin America and the Caribbean, there is the potential for a massive epidemic in the Americas that may parallel the situation in Africa, where many cases remain unrecognized and unreported." This is the conclusion reached by Dr. Thomas C. Quinn of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, Maryland, and four doctors from the Pan American Health Organization in Washington, D.C., as stated in an editorial entitled "AIDS in the Americas, An Emerging Public Health Crisis" in the April 13 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

In reality, Ibero-America is a health holocaust waiting to happen. Six years of sharp cutbacks in expenditures for health care, compounded by sharply falling incomes and worsening nutritional intake of populations and a collapse of government spending for the basic infrastructure of health, such as running water and sanitation, all occasioned by the enormous payments of interest on foreign debts, has made the continent's population vulnerable to epidemics that could threaten the very existence of the region's nations.

The AIDS crisis has become the subject of the most intense research because the threat is so insidious, but it is far from the only serious threat to health. Incredibly, death from starvation, or from severe malnutrition, has recently become a serious problem. Observers in several states of Mexico report "Africanized" conditions, in which children with bellies distended from hunger roam the streets, recalling scenes normally associated with the poorest regions of Africa. The fact that the real wage of most Mexicans has fallen by more than 50% in six years, and unemployment is now 20% and underemployment is 40%, means that the lot of the marginalized bottom strata of the country is far below basic subsistence level. Entire suburbs of Mexico city survive on what the children salvage from garbage dumps. Less than 2% of the Mexican gross national product is spent on health care, against 8% considered required for even minimally adequate coverage.

Hunger also stalks Peru, caught in the throes of a brutal cutoff of aid funds and the depredations of the terrorist Shin-

ing Path guerrillas. Every day 170 children under one year old die in Peru from malnutrition, dehydration, and other diseases derived from poor nutrition, according to figures presented by Msgr. Luis Bambaren, the bishop of Chimbote, Peru, to the Latin American Conference on Infant Survival held in Quito, Ecuador, April 11.

Even more shocking, 20,000 children a year (about 55 a day) are dying from diseases directly related to malnutrition in the food-rich country of Argentina, according to UNICEF. This is the result of government austerity policies implemented to pay the debt, that have dropped wage earners' real incomes by 30-60% since December 1983, according to the Center for Studies of Argentina. Thirty percent of Argentine households are now classified as poor, lacking sufficient income to cover basic necessities of clothing, diet, and education. Two million people live in slums around Buenos Aires.

But AIDS is the disease which threatens to exterminate the entire population if not stopped. Argentina is also among the countries in which AIDS is spreading fastest, with 315 cases now diagnosed, and it is estimated that there will be 16,000 cases by 1993, in a country of 30 million, according to a report by the National Program for Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Buenos Aires. The Mexican Actuaries Association has projected that AIDS will be among the top five killers in Mexico by 1992.

In the continent as a whole, as reported in the *New England Journal* editorial, the number of AIDS cases in South America increased by 95% between 1986 and 1987, and by 113% in the Caribbean. In Brazil, which remains the most seriously AIDS-infected nation in the continent, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, among others, AIDS has spread from homosexual men to bisexual men, and from there to prostitutes, who spread it to heterosexual men. In these countries, victims include a much higher proportion of heterosexual males, and of females, than in the United States, making the pattern more like that in Africa, where the disease is totally out of control. In Haiti, 10% of pregnant women are infected, the same rate as in parts of Africa.

The appalling poverty of most Brazilians facilitates the rapid spread of the disease. A recent report to the International Labor Organization, written by Prof. Mauricio Romão and based on World Health Organization data, reveals that 49.2% of Brazilians, 62 million people, live below the poverty line, more than half of whom, 38.3 million, live below the "threshold of indigence," earning less than \$17 a month, and don't receive the most minimal level of food.

This crisis is exactly what this magazine has predicted for years would be the inevitable result of imposing austerity on populations, in order to be able to service impossible debts. The annual payout of \$30-40 billion in debt service for six years—\$189 billion since 1982—stolen from consumption and investment, was foreordained to take its toll on the "bottom line," the health, and very survival, of the region's 400 million inhabitants.