

## Dateline Mexico by Carlos Mendez

### On the 'fast track' to cholera

*The health secretary says people should protect themselves from cholera, but the government will do nothing.*

**T**he only way to prevent the cholera epidemic from entering Mexico, is for the population to take "co-responsibility" in maintaining environmental hygiene and sanitation, primarily in rural areas, Health Secretary Jesús Kumate Rodríguez stated on April 22. Otherwise, he added, serious health problems could develop.

In other words, the Mexican government doesn't intend to take any substantive measures against cholera.

Outrageously, two days later, Kumate admitted that "the sanitary conditions in which more than 41 million Mexicans live—primarily those 17 million who live in extreme poverty—permit us to predict that they will be the most affected group in the event that the cholera epidemic continues to spread throughout the continent and reaches Mexico," the daily *Unomasuno* reported April 25.

Attempting to cover for his criminality, Kumate said that even the World Health Organization (WHO) insists "that neither vaccines nor *cordons sanitaires* can prevent cholera from entering our country."

What Kumate failed to report is that on March 27 in Lima, Peru, the WHO's director general, Hiroshi Nakajima, charged that the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity measures are the primary cause of cholera. Nakajima explained that Peru's infrastructure "is in a deplorable state as a consequence of the economic crisis, and the water supply is a problem which could cause the cholera pandemic to become endemic in the immediate future."

Mexico's health secretary also ne-

glected to say that the major cholera-related problem confronting the majority of the Mexican people is the lack of infrastructure for potable water and sewage, not to mention the drastic cuts in medical services and the growing malnutrition caused by almost a decade of extreme austerity.

In Peru, the cholera bacillus is re-infecting tens of thousands of people who survived the first attack but who, following their hospitalization, had to return to the same living conditions—the same contaminated water and lack of proper sanitation infrastructure.

To date, neither Kumate nor any other Mexican government official has said anything about the "Sucre Declaration" which calls for "potable water and basic sanitation for everyone—now," issued on April 22 by participants at the 15th Conference of Health Ministers of the Andean Countries. Among other things, the declaration states that "cholera is a social consequence of the economic structural adjustment measures which the Andean nations have adopted."

Dr. Nazario Román, president of the Hipólito Unánue Andean Health Agreement, warned that wealthy countries aren't free from the threat of cholera, which could become a pandemic and extend to all continents; it "could reach Mexico and the United States with incalculable speed," Román said, "since recent cholera cases in Miami show that the disease respects no borders."

Nor is it just rural areas which lack potable water and sanitation infrastructure. Large urban concentrations suffer from the same problems. Ci-

udad Nezahualcoyotl, located right next to Mexico City, is one of the poorest and most socially marginalized municipalities in the country, where several million inhabitants barely survive. Diseases such as yellow fever and measles are commonplace, but more recently, AIDS has taken a deadly toll. Dr. Omar Ruíz Campos, a national community liaison officer who works for the Conasida agency, reports that there are 2,000 AIDS victims in Netzahualcoyotl, including people who tested seropositive and those who have full-blown AIDS. Use of contaminated blood from a local blood bank, which took donations from drug addicts, was responsible for infecting hundreds of individuals.

A similar problem exists along the U.S.-Mexican border, where, according to a recent videotape produced by the AFL-CIO, the areas around U.S.-installed *maquiladoras* are hellholes. The Mexican daily *La Jornada* said that the AFL-CIO video "shows scenes of a Third World Mexico, with 'lost' cities, ditches in which viscous fluids flow, uncovered sewage. . . ."

A report published in the April 22 *Unomasuno* notes that on the U.S.-Mexican border, an area to which over 1 million people emigrate yearly in search of employment, "the *maquiladora* industry is growing very quickly. . . . Nonetheless, this process of expansion hasn't been accompanied by the best health and working conditions for workers; there isn't enough housing for the large flow of migrants, and the municipalities have serious deficits in services, which has meant that almost all the border cities have growing belts of misery to their south."

In short, after a decade of genocidal austerity, Mexico has several breeding grounds for cholera.