

Report from Rio by Silvia Palacios

The myth of the seventh power

True, Brazil is "different" from its neighbors—in the staggering magnitude of national hunger and disease.

In the same way as U.S. Federal Reserve chief Paul Volcker, James Baker III, and other members of the "Eastern Establishment" invented the myth of the U.S. economic recovery, their imitators in Brazil have staged the farce that Brazil is the *seventh world power*.

Frequently heard among those high circles of finance and policy, who have rejected Peruvian President Alan García's proposal to lower interest payments on debt and finish off the International Monetary Fund's usury, has been the following sophistry: "Well, Peru is a small country, we are different, we're a big country . . . the seventh world power." The fearful reality is that in Brazil, want and misery, in terms of numbers of population, for example in the region of the northwest and in the *favelas* (slums), are at least double Peru's. Let us look at some aspects of poverty in Brazil.

Brazil holds the seventh place in the world in infant mortality, caused by malnutrition, diarrhea, and infectious diseases. Statistics released in 1985 estimated that in this year alone, 360,000 children will "inevitably" die before the age of five; 300,000 of them before the age of one. In the northwest region, 40% of infant deaths are caused by diarrhea and malnutrition. The number of minors among those who "live" in absolute poverty, and the abandoned, is 30 million—twice the population of Peru.

In the first three months of 1986 there was an upsurge in poliomyelitis: 160 cases, of which 124 were reported in the northwest. In the same period

last year, a total of 25 cases was reported. The director of the National Superintendancy of Public Health Campaigns, Joselio Carvalho Branco, told the newspaper *O Globo*: "I recognize that we are losing the battle against the major endemic diseases."

"The means exist to control diseases such as polio and measles, but we have to realize that the very bad living conditions of the population are reflected in the capacity of the sector to carry out its functions," added a health ministry epidemiologist.

Outbreaks of hepatitis are also on the rise. In Fortaleza 15 cases were reported, and 17 in Itabuna, one of the two most important cities of the state of Bahia, where 8 persons died; the epidemic spread to at least two other important towns.

Health Minister Roberto Santos stated on April 7 that malaria is rising precipitously and now affects 400,000 persons, against the 200,000 at the outset of this decade; the disease, he said, is not limited to the Amazon region but extends to other states. The rise in malaria cases coincides exactly with the period when the Brazilian economy was subjected to International Monetary Fund control.

As to reported AIDS cases, Brazil has the world's second highest rate of increase, after the United States, and due to this rate of spread there perhaps are more than 1,000 cases. This is only an estimate, since accurate information is not available.

Under the export model of the country that boasts of being the "sev-

enth power," Brazil has turned into a huge exporter of food, which has not been made up for by new crops for internal consumption. For example, per-capita production of rice, beans, potatoes, and maize dropped by 12% between 1980 and 1984, while the population rose from 129 million to 133 million.

A recent study on hunger indicates that 90 million Brazilians consume less than the necessary caloric intake (2,400 per day). The 22 million poorest people have a deficit of more than 400 calories; 24 million have a daily deficit of 200 calories, and another 40 million have a deficit between 200 and 400.

A study just completed by a group of sociologists indicates that one-third of Brazilian families lives in conditions of absolute misery, and an additional one-fourth in poverty. Hence, more than 60% of the population lives in poverty or absolute misery; here Brazil is not in seventh place, but in *first*.

Brazil also holds the first place in the world in the concentration of national income in its population. While 10% of the citizenry, the richest sector, holds 50% of all the national income, 10% of Brazilians, the poorest, only possesses 2% of the national income.

And yet, Brazil is committed to go on paying almost \$12 billion in interest on the foreign debt, i.e., half of its export revenues. As had to be recognized, even by Treasury Minister Dilson Funaro, last year, annual interest payments "are the equivalent of an Itaipú" (the world's largest dam, on the Brazil-Uruguay border). But his Cruzado Plan, a financial scheme which respects the International Monetary Fund's rules, has no intention of putting a freeze on deaths from hunger or epidemics.