

Andean Report by Mark Sonnenblick

AIDS conferences held in Lima

Peru's battle against the IMF gives it moral authority to propose solutions for AIDS in the tropics.

Peruvian doctors responded with alacrity to learning of the links between poverty and the spread of AIDS into non-homosexual populations. At a medical conference in Lima, Dec. 9, it was conclusively shown that the conditions of misery caused by the International Monetary Fund, make the tropics into the best possible culture for AIDS.

The conference, "AIDS, the Black Death of the 21st Century," was co-sponsored by the Schiller Institute and the Peruvian Medical Federation. The evidence was systematically presented by Dr. Debra Freeman, a Baltimore-based public health adviser to the National Democratic Policy Committee, and by Dr. Bertha Farfán, a Mexican physician whose organizing has just forced the Mexican Health Ministry to classify AIDS as a contagious disease which must be centrally reported.

Interviews with Drs. Freeman and Farfán published in the press and on the radio shortly before the conference brought many of the 300 attendees. The coverage focused on the suppressed evidence of mosquito transmission of AIDS and on the interaction between poverty and disease. *El Popular* of Dec. 9, for example, quoted Debra Freeman: "The austerity imposed by the International Monetary Fund on debtor countries has created the unhealthy, filthy, and impoverished conditions in which AIDS propagates with greatest virulence. . . . In Africa, 50% of those infected are children. Political leaders have tried to keep this silent so as not to reverse the

genocidal economic policy imposed on the Third World."

This thrust brought a consensus of Peru's medical and military leaders that they should lead an international offensive against AIDS.

The president of the Peruvian Medical Federation, Dr. Hugo Díaz Lozano, told the conference, "Peru has the moral stature to claim leadership in a campaign of this type, because its own President is the main bulwark of defense of his population by having retained funds which previously served to pay debt and [using them] to improve living conditions to counteract the possibilities for the spread of this disease." He concluded, "In Latin America, the medical federations met a few months ago and we have formed the Medical Confederation of Latin America and the Caribbean. I have promised the Schiller Institute to bring whatever is proposed here to the next meeting of that body. Let us hope that we can make this movement [against AIDS] that of America and the Caribbean."

Dr. Díaz observed, "the Medical Federation would not have been able to carry out this event without the decisive participation of the Schiller Institute."

Medics from Peru's army, navy, air force, and police hospitals comprised one-third of the audience. One medic reported that the Peruvian army already has AIDS on its list of deadly contagious diseases. During this public seminar and another the next day at the military hospital, attended by 150 officers from all services, ques-

tioners kept honing in on potential mosquito transmission of AIDS and how IMF loan conditions cause vital social services such as health and sanitation to be written out of national budgets.

One officer confided that the military considers AIDS a national security matter, because two-thirds of the country's area is jungle, where everyone is bitten by mosquitos and other insects many times daily.

Peru's leading AIDS specialist, Dr. Raúl Patrucco, Immunology Chief of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute of Tropical and High Altitude Medicine at Cayetano Heredia University, noted that in every country, officials are shocked when AIDS first appears, but "the epidemiological chain of infection and transmission" soon makes it irrelevant how it first got into the country.

Before organizing began for this conference, AIDS was not taken seriously by the Peruvian Health Ministry, which took its cues from the World Health Organization. As Peruvian medical professionals became briefed on the generally suppressed findings that mosquitos and other blood-sucking insects are likely vectors for AIDS under conditions of intense poverty, things got hot. At first the health ministry ordered doctors at key AIDS treatment centers to shut up. But after Drs. Díaz and Patrucco had a fire-fight in the press with Health Minister David Tejada, things changed.

Patrucco told the conference that Tejada had promised to take AIDS seriously. One of the piquant moments during the question period at the end of the conference came when public health bureaucrats, protesting that they couldn't do anything about it, were severely reprimanded by one of the physicians in the audience and told to start testing blood donors and mapping the disease nationally.