

## Report from Rio by Silvia Carrasco

### Government fights AIDS panic

*The Sarney administration has dedicated its efforts to fighting panic, while the AIDS contagion spreads.*

**I**t appears that medical authorities in Brazil charged with combating the AIDS virus are doing more to try to halt the panic that is seizing hold of the population, than to fight the disease itself, which is freely proliferating, under the protection of false statistics.

Until now, the official number of cases reported since 1982 is 2,766, but it is estimated that, due to the precarious public health system in the country, the under-notification of cases surpasses 50%, which would, in fact, raise the number of cases to more than 6,000, and the total number of carriers to more than 1 million. This means that 1 of every 140 Brazilians could be AIDS-infected.

What makes this public health picture even worse is the rate of expansion of the disease, which is the highest in the world, due both to lack of control of private blood banks and to the illegal trafficking in blood that proliferates in the country. Aggravating the crisis further is the government's inexplicable refusal to consider that different forms of virus transmission exist, especially by insect, in this tropical nation.

The statistics of the Health Ministry itself show that of the total number of AIDS cases in Brazil, 5.7% belong to the heterosexual population while 7.1% belong to category. Given that the number of heterosexual AIDS victims is much higher than in countries like the United States, Brazilian epidemiologists believe that these statistics demonstrate that contagion among the "traditional risk groups" is decreasing as the virus

spreads into the general population.

Already, in zones far from the major urban centers of the country, such as the Indian regions of center-west Brazil, the first AIDS cases are beginning to appear. According to the president of the state agency in charge of Indian affairs, Romeo Juca, the problem will become catastrophic if the virus begins to spread to the *garimpos* (laborers from the gold mines) who work without any health service and under conditions of widespread promiscuity.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that the campaign of the liberals—who defend homosexuals' "human rights" against "discrimination"—has infected a large number of private physicians who, despite the law, continue to refuse to report AIDS cases out of alleged fear of discrimination against their patients.

The true face of this majority group of liberals within the Brazilian medical profession was revealed by their demands for application of euthanasia to AIDS victims. The campaign was first unleashed by a group of Marxist theologians, to which belongs the Vatican-censured priest Leonardo Boff. One of his followers, AIDS-infected sociologist Herbert de Souza, has used the AIDS deaths of his two hemophiliac brothers to promote euthanasia through the media and the universities. Says de Souza, "AIDS victims should decide if they live or die."

Despite the enormous efforts of the medical authorities to deny the possibility of AIDS transmission by mosquitos and other insects, the popula-

tion understands that this is a possibility, above all in a country where entire populations live in swampy regions with temperatures above 40° centigrade during most of the year. The possibility of AIDS transmission by mosquito was, in fact, the central theme of the Second International Seminar on AIDS held in September 1987 in São Paulo. That seminar received extensive coverage in the national media, until the health authorities stepped in to halt further release of the results.

Exemplary of the population's healthy skepticism toward the government's cover-up campaigns is an incident that occurred in December 1987 in a town in the state of Espiritu Santo, north of Rio de Janeiro. In that town, the population went to the polls to choose a new mayor, and delivered a striking protest vote by stamping their ballots with the name: MOSQUITO. The new mayor was elected with 20,000 votes, "losing" to the MOSQUITO, which garnered 29,000 votes!

Two other noteworthy examples of how the Brazilian population views the AIDS problem took place in March of this year, in two towns in the interior of the country. The first, in the small city of Salto (100 km from São Paulo), where a physician released his own epidemiological projections which revealed that Salto was suffering two AIDS deaths, 8 confirmed AIDS cases, 14 suspected AIDS cases, and 2,000 carriers. The doctor reported, "If nothing is done to halt the spread of the disease, we will have 54,000 AIDS-infected in three years, which leads us to believe that in six years the entire population of Salto will have become contaminated." The panic unleashed by this report has created a consensus among the population that "everyone should take the test."