

Brazilian minister: Save lives before paying debt

by Silvia Palacios

During the 44th General Assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO), held in Geneva in the first week of May, Dr. Alceni Guerra, the health minister of Brazil, blamed the International Monetary Fund for the current disaster facing the continent's health and sanitation systems. He stated that such international institutions as the IMF had made Ibero-America a "sick continent," facing an imminent threat of losing millions of people to the cholera pandemic now sweeping the region. Health conditions cannot be ignored when developing nations renegotiate their debt conditions, the Brazilian minister asserted. "Life cannot take second place."

Emphasizing that he had the backing of Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello, Minister Guerra proposed a specific, urgent measure to combat cholera and other epidemics: Divert part of the foreign debt payments into sanitation infrastructure projects. He presented data to document the cruelty stemming from the usurious foreign debt. South America, he explained, has a foreign debt of about \$500 billion. And Brazil, which is the continent's largest debtor and owed over \$110 billion of this amount, paid out \$85 billion in interest over the course of the 1980s. If 20% of this had been invested in health, Dr. Guerra argued, the country would be in a much better situation to deal with the cholera crisis facing it.

The fact is that the decade of 1980-90 were the years of the worst looting in all of Ibero-America's history, as can be seen in the **Figures 1 and 2**. Ibero-America as a whole paid \$313 billion in interest payments over the decade, and yet its foreign debt *rose* during this period from \$243 billion to \$439 billion. In the case of Brazil, the country paid out about \$85

billion, as Guerra noted, and yet here the foreign debt jumped from \$71 billion to \$111 billion between 1980 and 1989. This looting through the foreign debt mechanism meant that Ibero-America, and Brazil in particular, did not invest the necessary resources in maintaining the health and other vital infrastructure for the survival of the population.

In Brazil, for example, in terms of sanitation, the current precarious systems are the result of investments made in the decade of the 1970s. The National Sanitation Plan, which was drawn up in the mid-1970s when Brazil launched its great infrastructure projects, had as a goal to provide 80% of the Brazilian municipalities with garbage collection, sewerage, and potable water services.

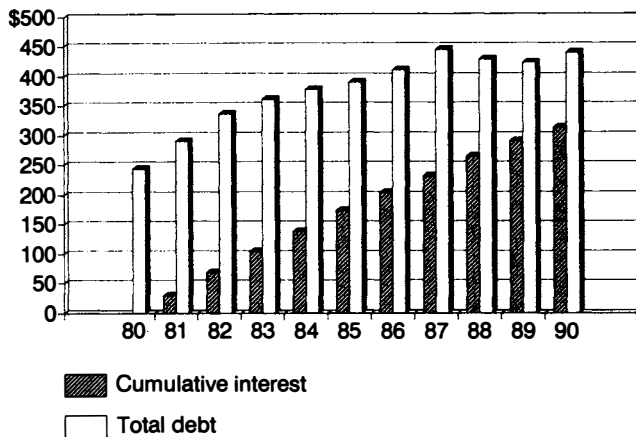
But during the most recent decade, Brazil docilely paid its debt and stopped all investment. Thus, basic sanitation investment dropped to an annual level of \$80 million, an almost insignificant amount; experts consider an optimal average investment to be about \$3 billion per year.

Cholera, the IMF's epidemic

In 1974, *EIR* Founding Editor Lyndon H. LaRouche forecast that, if the zero growth policies of the World Bank and the draconian austerity of the IMF continued to be applied in the Third World, there would necessarily be a resurgence of pandemics which humanity had earlier controlled, and that these would possibly be accompanied by new types of diseases, new "Black Deaths" engendered by the bankers' boundless usury. Unfortunately, that forecast is being fulfilled.

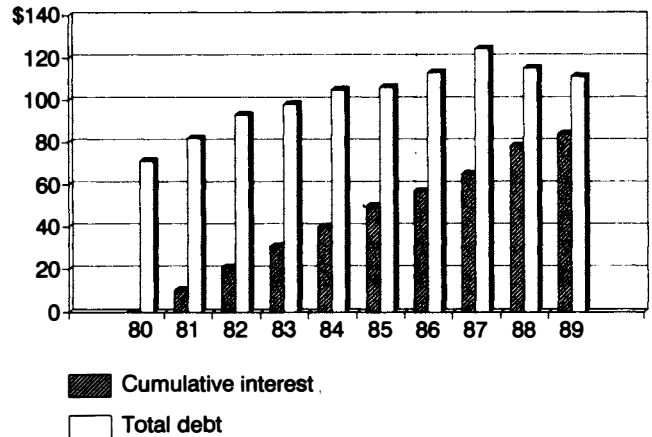
Then in 1982, LaRouche provided a solution to this prob-

FIGURE 1
Ibero-America paid, and the debt kept growing
 (billions of U.S. \$)



Source: World Bank.

FIGURE 2
Brazil paid, and the debt kept growing
 (billions of U.S. \$)



Source: World Bank.

lem, proposing that Third World nations use the "debt bomb" to protect themselves from the destruction wrought by the usury of the international financial institutions.

So, today, in order to deal with cholera, and in Brazil's case also with the dramatic, exponential growth of AIDS cases (medical authorities estimate the number of cases at 300,000), the first step is to declare a total moratorium on the foreign debt, before the continent is killed off by disease and starvation.

According to conservative estimates of the WHO, Brazil will face about 3 million cases of cholera. On May 14, Brazilian Health Ministry official Percy Soares, in announcing a special program to combat cholera with resources on the order of \$3 billion, recognized that Brazil has sanitation conditions which are worse than those of poorer countries, such as Costa Rica or Sri Lanka.

The cholera epidemic is taking two routes into Brazil, pincers-style. One is through Peru, directly into the Amazon region, which is the area of the country almost totally lacking in any sanitation services, from where it will jump to the big cities where the the immense *favelas*, or slum areas, will be a tremendous breeding ground for the disease. The second route is through Bolivia.

Taking both routes into account, a total of 12 cases of cholera have been reported. The newest was found in the capital of the state of São Paulo, the industrial heart of Ibero-America. "The outskirts of the cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Manaus, Salvador, and Recife, constitute a true red zone of cholera threat. If contamination occurs in those critical centers, we will lose control of the disease," National Secretary of Sanitation Walter Annichino declared on April 20.

Almost half of Brazil is vulnerable to the cholera bacteri-

um. On May 18, the latest study was released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), which shows an almost unimaginable sanitation vulnerability in Brazil. More than 100 million Brazilians residing in urban areas—that is 66% of the population—lack clean water, sewerage, and garbage collection services. This lack of basic sanitation is already the principal cause of the 500,000 cases per year of malaria, the 5,000 cases of Chagas' disease, and of the more than 40 million Brazilians infected with schistosomiasis. Out of 4,425 Brazilian municipalities, less than half (47.28%) have a sewage system; only 239 (5.4%) have treatment facilities for sewage; and only 51 cities in the country (1% of the total) have their own treatment facilities.

It is in the North, the "Africanized" area of the country, where the greatest lack of basic sanitation is to be found. Of 298 municipalities, only 24 have a network of septic tanks. In other areas, such as in the Amazon capital of Manaus, which is feared to become the epicenter of cholera contagion in the country, the situation is no better. The city of one and a half million people has sewerage for less than 4% of the population, and only 7% have potable water in their homes.

Contrary to the lies of the bankers and their mouthpieces, the cholera contagion is far from under control in Ibero-America. In fact, new countries continue to be added to the victim list. In Venezuela, for example, three probable cholera cases were just discovered along the border with Brazil. The arrival of the cholera bacillus is also considered inevitable in Central America, according to a task force of specialists who met in Costa Rica May 16. Said Raúl Penna, a representative of the Pan-American Health Organization for Central America, "although we cannot say that the arrival of cholera in the region is imminent, we know that it is

unavoidable." At least 600,000 cases of cholera of a total Central American population of 30 million are expected over the next few years.

In Peru, the number of cholera cases has now surpassed 182,000, while in Ecuador, health officials are admitting to nearly 11,000 cases in that country. Colombia, too, is acknowledging more than 800, while Chile is struggling to keep several outbreaks there from becoming epidemic.

Banks' policy amounts to infanticide

Minister Guerra's presentation in Geneva reached a high point, when he denounced the infanticide that is resulting from imposition of the bankers' brutal austerity terms for paying the foreign debt. In Brazil, he said, 350,000 children are dying each year, "four times the number of deaths that resulted from the bombing of Hiroshima." It is as if "three airplanes filled with children were crashing every day of the year in Brazil," he added. The leading cause of infant deaths in Brazil is diarrheal illnesses, caused—as with cholera—by a lack of basic sanitation.

The murder of babies in Brazil and throughout the Third World, is the cold, hard truth that lies behind the perverse face of bankers' usury. The explosive imagery used by Minister Guerra has enraged the neo-liberal fanatics, who accused the minister of being "grotesque," and demanded his head. A May 9 editorial in the daily *O Estado de São Paulo*, entitled "The Limits of Stupidity," warned that the bold truths stated by the health minister in Geneva could ruin ongoing negotiations with Brazil's creditor banks. President Collor had better make up his mind, the editorial demanded: "The bankers and foreign investors have a right to ask whose mentality predominates in Brazil—the President's or his minister's?"

A new book just published by the Danish section of UNICEF, Danish Save the Children Foundation, offers timely confirmation of the infanticide committed by the International Monetary Fund. The book, *Lost Generations—A Debate about Children and the Debt Crisis*, identified the high interest rates imposed by then U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker in 1979, the 1982 debt crisis, and the "free market religion" exemplified by George Bush's Enterprise for the Americas Initiative, as the principal causes of misery in the world today.

"Every week, year round, 273,000 children die in the Third World from diseases that do not harm our own children. That adds up to 14 million children every year who do not die from the catastrophic famines, the floods, the earthquakes, or the other natural disasters we are entertained with on the TV news or at humanitarian rock concerts. All 14 million die quietly. Killed by the rich world's lack of will to help. . . . Throughout the '90s, it would take \$2.5 billion a year to save the lives of most of these 14 million." This \$2.5 billion "amounts to 6% of what the underdeveloped countries send to the industrialized countries in interest payments on their foreign debt to the West."

Special Report

Group seeks to save the children of Iraq

Almost three months since the official close of hostilities against Iraq, the scale of the devastation wrought on the country and its people—especially its children—is beginning to emerge in the public view. The picture, as presented by members of the newly formed Committee to Save the Children in Iraq at a press conference in Bonn on May 15, is one which strikes horror in the hearts of moral men and women.

In her remarks concluding the Bonn press conference, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, chairwoman of the Schiller Institute, addressed what the real target of "Desert Storm" was: "It was precision bombing, to be sure, but not to spare the civilian population, rather to apply the 'bomb now, die later' principle. The aim of the war was not Saddam Hussein or Kuwait, but the destruction of Iraq as a developing sector land that was on the verge of taking off." The Schiller Institute initiated the call for the formation of the committee (see *Documentation*).

Not only Iraq, but the whole developing sector is targeted, said Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche, pointing to the 120 million people in Latin America threatened by cholera, 5 million homeless in Bangladesh, the 27 million people in Africa, all suffering, not from "natural catastrophes," but from "the result of policies developed in the 1970s to reduce the population of the developing sector." She quoted statements made the week before at a Conservative Party gathering in Britain by Sir Nicholas Fairbairns, to the effect that food aid should not be sent to storm-ravaged Bangladesh, because it would allow them to only "breed more people." This attitude, she said, betrays the same kind of thinking behind Hitler's view of people as useless eaters; today, there are those who think secretly that it is better to let masses of people in the developing sector die.

Only three days after the Bonn press conference, another member organization of the committee was able to announce that former U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan will ensure that the U.N. pays for transport and delivery of goods collected by the Letter of James-Food for Peace in Sweden and the Chaldean Patriarch in London. The committee itself intends to oversee each and every shipment.