



SICK OF GLOBALIZATION

by Kintto Lucas

CUENCA, Ecuador – Alternative reports on global health, presented at the second People's Health Assembly in Ecuador this week, question the free-market, neoliberal economic model and view it as the cause of many of the health problems facing humanity today.

These include the indiscriminate use of toxic products in agriculture, pollution caused by the oil industry, the consumption of transgenic crops, the destruction of the urban environment by pollution, and the commercialization of health services.

The reports by the Global Health Watch and the Observatorio Latinoamericano de Salud see a healthy life as a fundamental human right, the enjoyment of which depends on economic, political and social factors.

The Global Health Watch is a broad collaboration of public health experts, non-governmental organizations, civil society activists, community groups, health workers and academics.

Mexican academic Laura Juárez Sánchez, who took part in drawing up the reports, said that by generating increasing unemployment, poverty and rural migration, the "capitalist economic model" is the main cause of the return of illnesses that had been basically eradicated and of deaths from easily curable ailments.

Juárez Sánchez pointed to the reappearance of cholera and deaths of people from scabies, typhoid fever, diarrhea, tonsillitis and pneumonia.

These illnesses are expanding as a result of "malnutrition and the lack of access to and deterioration of basic social services like health care, education and housing," said Juárez Sánchez, a researcher at the Universidad Obrera, a Mexican university.

"Rural and urban families are forced to live in overcrowded conditions without piped water or plumbing, to share collective bathrooms, and to live under roofs of corrugated iron or cardboard," she said.

Alex Zapata, who wrote the chapter of the Global Health Watch report - also known as the Alternative World Health Report - that deals with the "mercantilization" of water, said "capitalist globalization" has led to the privatization of sewage and water services.

That means water is becoming a marketable commodity or merchandise to which only those who can afford it have access, which will have a negative impact on the public health of a large part of the global population, he said.

The reports were presented Wednesday at the July 17-23 second People's Health Assembly in the city of Cuenca in southern Ecuador.

Biologist Elizabeth Bravo of Ecuador, who provided information on the effects of transgenic food crops, said the introduction of genetically modified seeds is giving certain transnational corpora-





tions control over food production worldwide, "as is already occurring in the case of soy beans."

"The global market for transgenic soy is the monopoly of a single company, the U.S.-based Monsanto, which sells seeds that are resistant to its Roundup herbicide," she said.

"The (Roundup Ready) seeds are not more productive," said Bravo. "The only thing they do is make farmers dependent on a weed control model based on intensive use of an herbicide."

According to the biologist, the expansion of transgenic crops, besides creating dependency, promotes monoculture farming with the subsequent decline of essential food crops and the loss of diversity and food sovereignty.

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Bravo also said the effects of transgenic crops are extremely negative for the poor rural population, which in turn has repercussions on public health.

"The expansion of soy in Argentina has displaced other crops like rice, corn, sunflowers and wheat, and has pushed other farming activities into marginal areas. Since 1988, the number of farms has shrunk by 24.5 percent, with the disappearance of 103,400 family farms.

"Thousands and thousands of families migrate from the countryside to urban slums every year," said the biologist.

Bravo admitted that more research is needed into the health effects on humans of transgenic foods, but stressed that studies have found negative consequences for animals living near fields where genetically modified crops are grown.

The alternative health reports also point to the violence plaguing different regions and threatening the local populations, mentioning Colombia, in the grip of a four-decade armed conflict, and the U.S.-led war on Iraq, launched in March 2003.

Physicians taking part in the People's Health Assembly noted that the thousands of Iraqi civilians who have fallen victim to the violence over the past two years included many health professionals.

"In 2004 alone 71 medical professors have been killed or have been intimidated to leave the country. There is complete insecurity in Iraqi hospitals that has resulted in many casualties," said Dr. Salam Ismael, secretary-general of the organization Doctors for Iraq.

Ismael urged the more than 1,500 delegates from over 70 countries who are taking part in this week's Assembly to demand support from the World Health Organization (WHO) to put an end to the violence and killing in his country.

He also proposed the creation of an international commission to investigate war crimes and bring to light the horrors that his people are suffering.

Hospitals in Iraq are raided and wounded suspects are arrested without the least respect for their human rights and the Geneva Convention, said the Iraqi doctor.

What is happening in Iraq is "a war crime of the first order," said Dr. Bert De Belder, coordinator of Medical Aid for the Third World (MATW), a health solidarity agency of the Belgium-based International Action for Liberation (INTAL).

Professor Qasem Chowdhury of Bangladesh praised the alternative reports and underlined the connections between health movements from all continents that made the second annual People's Health Assembly possible.

Argentine Dr. Mirta Roses, director of the Pan American Health Organization, said the right to a healthy life should be linked to recognition of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity.

This recognition, besides taking into account universal access to health care and social participation, must also take into consideration traditional medicine, traditional healers and collective intellectual property, she said.

The origins of this week's gathering date back to 1978, during the WHO annual assembly, when 134 governments, in response to pressure by social movements, signed the Declaration of Alma





Ata in Kazakhstan (former Soviet Union), committing themselves to achieving an acceptable level of health for all people of the world by the year 2000.

The initial enthusiasm on the part of governments gradually waned, prompting civil society organizations, minorities, indigenous peoples and other groups involved in health questions to take up the banner of "health for all".

The first People's Health Assembly, held in Savar, Bangladesh in December 2000 under the theme "To Hear the Unheard", drew more than 1,500 participants from 75 countries.

One of the achievements of the meeting in Bangladesh was the approval of the People's Health Declaration, based on a vision of a better and healthier world - a starting point for a global health movement, said Dr. Jaime Breilh with the Health Research and Advisory Center, one of the groups that organized the Assembly.

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