

VICTIMS OF CHOLERA

AFTER 500 YEARS EPIDEMICS BROUGHT BY "CIVILIZATION" ARE STILL KILLING THE INDIAN PEOPLE



On Jan. 1, 1992, during a long and warm summer, Argentina was hit by the cholera epidemic. The first person to acquire the disease, and the first fatal victim, was a Mataco Indian who lived in Santa Victoria Este, a province of Salta. Soon five more cases were diagnosed, all of them Indians of the same village.

The focal point of the epidemic was the area where the Mataco and Chorote people live. The area is known as "The Great Chaco" (El Gran Chaco) and it includes the provinces of Salta, Formosa, and Chaco; this area has been devastated by indiscriminate deforestation. The Indian people live in communities which lack sanitary services and means of communication.

The provincial government in Salta, implemented tight military control, with the participation of the military Border Patrol. Physicians were allowed into the area only when accompanied by military personnel. The Indian people were intimidated and forced to attend the sanitary establishments. A military blockade was set up to isolate the area.

The Mataco people still remember that during the smallpox epidemic of 1930, military personnel burnt their houses often with the sick people inside, in an effort to prevent the spread of the disease to the rest of the population. As a consequence of this treatment, many Matacos fled to the forest, allowing for further spread of the disease.

The Indian people of Argentina in general, and particularly those living in this territory, have been displaced by the national society to marginal areas; they constitute a cheap labor force, and do not have access to adequate health care and education.

They become the center of attention of government officials only when they are victims of infectious diseases which can be transmitted to the rest of the society. However, historically they have been silent victims of malnutrition, dysentery, Chagas disease, tuberculosis, infant mortality and many other illnesses which do not represent a threat for the rest of the population. It is not by chance; that Indian people have been the first victims of cholera, "the disease of poverty".

Attitude toward the Indian People

The statements of the mass media regarding the cholera epidemic showed that in Argentina Indian people are seriously discriminated against. The discourse of the press blamed the Indians' way of life for the acquisition and transmission of the disease, ignoring their historical experience of exploitation and discrimination. We can provide many examples of the disdain and ignorance of the press in their coverage of the "news about the cholera epidemic": A woman legislator said: "these groups do not have culture or education, what can we expect of the Indians?" The latifundists of the province of Salta, who export vegetable crops, declared to the local press: "Because of a few shitty Indians we are going to lose a lot of money."

Arguments of the press and health officials for explaining the epidemic: "The Indians eat raw fish, they use the river to defecate." None of these statements are true. The Mataco people do not eat raw fish, and they are very careful to avoid contamination of their rivers. Headlines of a newspaper of nationwide distribution stated: "The first case of cholera in a white person has been diagnosed."

Racial conflicts in Argentina are usually covered by a discourse which presents the Argentine society as a homogenous population of European descent. It conceals and ignores the fact that Argentina is a multiethnic country, like any country in the American Continent, and most of all, it conceals the discrimination against Indian people.

Five hundred years after the arrival of the colonizers, the epidemics continue to be a weapon for the extermination of the first nations of this continent. To protest the discrimination, and most of all the fact that the Argentine society consistently ignores the existence of Indian people, please write to President Carlos Menem, Casa de Gobierno, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Source: *The Oyemboati Foundation for the Promotion of Indian People*