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Notes On Air Quality In Mexico City

by Steven Ranieri

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Jan. 22: The Agence France-Presse reported that the high pollution levels registered in recent days in Mexico City prompted municipal authorities to close a number of downtown streets to automobile traffic. In spite of government plans and promises, the pollution index is rising. Jan. 27: According to city government legislator Manuel Diaz Infante, the installation of emergency oxygen booths in the capital as a means to combat pollution "will only terrorize the city's inhabitants." In an interview with Notimex, Diaz said the idea is bereft of common sense. He added that the suggestion was a response to city government requiring anti-pollution measures by businesses. Feb. 13: According to a report by the Ecology and Urban Development Secretariat (SEDUE), since Jan. 1, there has been only one day when air quality in the Mexico City metropolitan area was defined as entirely safe to breathe. Under the Metropolitan Air Quality Index (IMECA), a reading of below 100 is considered acceptable. On 22 days since Jan. 1, the IMECA index was between 100 (an international standard high) and 200, and on 21 days, above 200. On Jan. 19, the index reached 318, an historical record. Feb. 17: At a colloquium on sexual desire and love in Mexico City, sexologist Reinaldo Massoni said high pollution levels in the capital is linked to reduced sexual drive as well as premature aging. According to a study by the Health Ministry's epidemiology department, blood tests of children born in Mexico City show high levels of lead, mercury, cadmium, nickel, arsenic, magnesium, copper, silicon and asbestos. Feb. 18: Federico Velez, president of the National Perfume and Cosmetics Association (CANAIPCO) told reporters that a dramatic increase in sales of skin care products to men and women was the result of high pollution levels in Mexico City. Velez said that studies conducted by CANAIPCO and health professionals have demonstrated that polluted air causes skin allergies and eye infections. Feb. 19: The UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) released a report detailing a large-scale pollution control program for Mexico City. The program is dependent on financial and technical cooperation from the US, Japan, Germany, France and the World Bank. According to the ECLAC report, pollution levels in Mexico City have dropped 15% since measures regulating public and private transportation were implemented in winter 1989. The report stated that 83% of Mexico City's air pollution is caused by exhaust fumes from about 2.5 million vehicles. Effluents from about 30,000 industrial plants in the metropolitan area and vehicle exhaust are responsible for 4.8 million tons per year of air polluting particles and substances. The ECLAC program focuses on revamping urban transportation, production of lower pollutant gasolines, and adaptation of power plants and industrial processes to use of less harmful fuels. The report calls for raising gasoline prices, and electricity and public transportation rates to finance construction of a new public transportation system with emphasis on a metro or subway system. Feb. 28: At a press conference in Mexico City, deputy ecology minister Sergio Reyes Lujan said pollution is a "very serious" health risk for all inhabitants of the metropolitan area. He said the formation of ozone in the Valle de Mexico ranks as the most severe problem. Since Jan. 1, tolerance levels of this substance have been surpassed one in every three days. The valley (2,420 meters above sea level) is home to about 20 million people. An estimated 3 million vehicles per day travel the metro area's streets and freeways. Reyes Lujan said that government efforts to reduce other toxic substances, such as sulphur dioxide, have been successful. In 1990, sulphur dioxide levels surpassed acceptable norms on six days, compared to

up to 50 days in other nations. In October last year, the government implemented a four- year pollution reduction program. Foreign sources are contributing \$1.1 billion of the program's total cost, estimated at \$2.52 billion. Lujan said that of the 30,000 manufacturing plants located in the Mexico City metro area, only 1,550 are large- and medium-scale. Of the latter, 300 including the 18 de Marzo refinery and two thermoelectricity plants (all state- run) are major contributors to air pollution. The official emphasized that public and private transport are responsible for 80% of atmospheric pollutants. Industrial processes pollute less, he said, but on occasion their effluents are more toxic. (Sources: Notimex, 01/27/91, 02/18/91, 02/19/91; La Jornada, 02/14/91; EFE, 02/17/91; Agence France-Presse, 01/22/91, 02/28/91)

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