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Mexico's Health Secretary Loses to Hong Kong Doctor in Bid to Lead WHO

by LADB Staff

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Mexican Health Secretary Julio Frenk Mora made a strong bid for the nomination as director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), but in the end the post went to China's Dr. Margaret Chan. The new director-general will be filling the vacancy created by the death of Dr. Lee Jong-wook in May of this year. Frenk, who was the only Latin American candidate among eleven original nominees, reached the final phase of the selection process in early November but could not overcome the strong support for Chan among members of the executive board. Chan easily defeated Frenk by a vote of 24-10. She was expected to gain ratification from the 193 WHO member countries at the organization's general assembly later in November.

If confirmed, Chan would begin her term in January 2007, serving until the end of June 2012, officials said. Supporters said Frenk was an attractive candidate because of his efforts to promote increased access to health care in Mexico through the Seguro Popular. Under his leadership at the Secretaria de Salud (SSA), 22 million Mexicans signed up for a low-cost federal health-care program. Many observers said, however, that Frenk might have been fighting an uphill battle because of Chan's popularity and her strong track record in global health issues.

Chan, who served nine years as director of Hong Kong's health department, received recognition for her successful efforts in fighting the world's first outbreak of bird flu and for her prompt response to an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) on the island in 2003. Chan joined the WHO in 2003 following the SARS outbreak and later assumed oversight of the agency's flu-pandemic campaign in 2005. As an assistant director-general, she has led efforts to fight communicable diseases and prepare for a possible pandemic should bird flu mutate into a strain easily transmitted among human beings.

Deal with tobacco companies may have hurt Frenk

In the end, Frenk's chances of obtaining the post may also have been derailed by questionable practices during his tenure as head of the SSA. The most damaging of these practices was an agreement between the SSA and a major Mexican tobacco company. Under the deal, Philip Morris de Mexico pledged to donate a portion of cigarette revenues to the SSA to fund a variety of health programs in exchange for a moratorium on cigarette taxes.

The tobacco company provided US\$400 million during a period of 30 months on the condition that the government not impose new taxes on cigarettes. Partly as a result of lobbying by Frenk, the Chamber of Deputies voted against increasing the cigarette tax in 2005, even after the finance committee (Comision de Hacienda) in the lower house had recommended such an increase (see SourceMex, 2005-11-09). "Those who criticized the agreement rightly note that, besides forcing a government ministry (SSA) to protect an industry against an increase in taxes, this creates a dangerous precedent for future negotiations on regulatory matters between the private sector and

the government," said Roberto Mena, a columnist for the Mexico City daily business newspaper *El Economista*.

Mena noted that Frenk's stance regarding the tobacco industry led several anti-smoking organizations to urge the WHO selection committee to reject his candidacy. Frenk's efforts to combat smoking in Mexico were weak at best, noted Mena. For example, the health secretary failed to push Mexican tobacco companies to place more stringent health-warning labels on cigarette packets. In the European Union (EU), cigarette packages have a warning on the front with the message, "Smoking Kills."

On the back of the package, the message warns: "Smoking is Highly Addictive; Don't Start." In contrast, cigarette packets in Mexico only warn about the health risks of smoking during pregnancy. Some critics say heavy lobbying by the Fox government and Frenk's status as the only Latin American candidate were the reasons why he went so far in the selection process. He was one of five finalists who advanced to the second round of the selection process, along with Chan, Elena Salgado of Spain, Shigeru Omi of Japan, and Kazem Behbehani of Kuwait. Salgado, Omi, and Behbehani were later eliminated, leaving only Frenk and Chan. "

All the lobbying efforts by the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) and President Fox in the end were useless," said the daily newspaper *Excelsior*. "Julio Frenk did not obtain the necessary votes and came in second place." China also lobbied heavily for Chan during all stages of the selection process. Some WHO insiders said the lobbying efforts were unnecessary. "This was not an election about countries," said US Assistant Secretary for Health John Agwunobi. "This was an election about individuals...Margaret will be a servant of the entire world."

Chan cited the welfare of women as one of her top priorities as head of the WHO. "Reducing health problems in women and empowering them will result in a dramatic increase in health-promoting behaviors, right where it counts most," Chan said.

another priority, she said, would be to enhance public-health efforts in Africa. "The people of Africa carry an enormous and disproportionate burden of ill health and premature death," she noted. "The health of the people of Africa must therefore be the key indicator of the performance of the WHO." She also pledged to strengthen efforts in two areas in which she has expertise: infectious diseases and pandemic preparedness. (Sources: *El Economista*, 10/25/06; *Reforma*, 10/29/06; Reuters, 11/03/06; *El Financiero*, *La Cronica de Hoy*, Spanish news service EFE, 11/07/06; Associated Press, *Excelsior*, 11/07/06, 11/09/06; *The Herald-Mexico City*, 11/09/06; *La Jornada*, 11/07/06, 11/09/06, 11/10/06)

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