

Water and Mexico's National Security

José Luis Piñeyro*



Trucks bring water to Mexico City areas where scarcity is chronic.

In Mexico, like in the rest of Latin America, the trend is to consider drinking water a private, not public, good. Experts in fresh water mention several ways to privatize it using three basic arguments offered by governments, businessmen and international financial agencies like the World Bank. First, they say that there is a generalized water scarcity in the world, differing, of course, from country to country, region to region and continent to continent. For example, Canada has much more drinkable water than Mexico. Secondly, they say that the costs of maintenance, improvement, reparation and distribution of water pipelines can only be met with national and international private capital given the restrictions of government budgets and public finances. Third, they argue that water is wasted because consumers do not pay the real price of extraction and operating costs of the “blue gold” and because a culture of water conservation is almost non-existent.¹

* Professor and researcher at the Sociology Department of the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Azcapotzalco campus. Jlpineyro@aol.com

One way of privatizing the “blue gold” is granting public or private concessions for temporary usage (renewable periods of 10 or 30 years) to multinational companies like water bottlers, real estate companies or agribusiness.

The following are different ways of privatizing the “blue gold”.² One is granting public or private concessions for temporary usage (renewable periods of 10 or 30 years) to multinational companies like water bottlers, real estate companies or agribusiness. Another is granting consortia exclusive rights to the industrial use of residual water so that only they can recycle it, thus appropriating it. Another is to build dams and pipelines and change the course of rivers to supply areas with high industrial, agro-industrial and urban consumption. Another way is to privatize land and bio-regions according to the needs of companies that consume great volumes of water, separating the ownership of the land from that of the wells.³ Lastly, privatization occurs when a public good like water is bottled and sold; in Mexico, the market for bottled water is worth 32 billion pesos and Coca-Cola, Pepsicola and Nestlé, in addition to selling soft drinks, sell bottled water.⁴

Usually when we talk about strategic natural resources, we think of oil, natural gas or minerals like iron, copper and aluminum. They are considered essential for civilian and military industry, commerce and services, experiments and inventions in air, land or maritime transportation or cybernetic communications and automation. They are fuels that contribute to moving the machines and instruments of the mil-

itary and civilian industrial complex and services or they are minerals needed to make alloys for scientific and technological experiments.

However, the productivist, technical view of modern society has been supplemented by another that puts more emphasis on the finite space of the globe and the time limit on humanity’s devastation of the ecology based on an economic model that feeds on the human, animal and vegetable environment. That is, the new view postulates the need to adopt an ecologically self-sustaining development model that is socially and politically inclusive. Respect and conservation of our natural surroundings and the satisfaction of basic social needs must be the guide and not simply economic growth that ultra-concentrates wealth and income and destroys the environment, according to one specialist.⁵

The air we breathe every day, the water we drink and the food we eat are vital: without them, no form of human or animal life is possible. They are ne-

cessary for any national security strategy. In fact, some military strategists and civilian analysts say that future wars will not be only over the control of fuel and minerals, but also for the control of drinking water and therefore of regions with abundant water.⁶ In Mexico’s governmental and private spheres people are almost totally unaware of the gravity of the growing scarcity of water, the constant deforestation that affects rainfall, the quality of the air we breathe and the food dependency on the United States evidenced in the escalating imports of basic grains like corn, beans and rice.⁷ Water, air and sufficient quality foodstuffs should be considered some of the priorities in a Mexican national security strategy. They undoubtedly have an impact on the quality and quantity of sustained reproduction of human and natural resources in our nation-state.

In contrast to the aforementioned unawareness, President Fox’s National Development Plan for 2001-2006 points to threats to national security: poverty and inequality, the population’s vulnerability to natural disasters, environmental destruction, crime, organized crime, illicit drug trafficking and corruption. The plan underlines how indispensable it is to establish an agenda of risks to foresee threats that endanger the population’s welfare, state institutions and “the sustainability of development or our territory’s safety.” It is

Some military strategists and civilian analysts say that future wars will not be only over the control of fuel and minerals, but also for the control of drinking water and therefore of regions with abundant water.

even more precise when it mentions, “The growing *environmental deterioration*, particularly deforestation, whose effects on the country’s water system and biosphere impact negatively on society, the economy and security.”⁸

Nevertheless, as in other areas (the creation of 1.2 million jobs a year, shoring up public security, achieving 7-percent-a-year economic growth, reducing extreme poverty, etc.), the Fox administration’s national development plan, like others before it, has been more rhetoric than reality, with demagoguery prevailing over tangible results. Regarding solving the grave, complex problem of water, Fox officials just continue to say that it will only be solved by privatizing the entire water distribution system, selling it off to national and international capital.⁹ Businessmen’s mentality considers no alternative to turning a public good into a private one, whose consumption will depend on each person’s or each family’s purchasing power. They should “pay until it hurts,” as Alberto Cárdenas Jiménez, former minister of the environment and natural resources, recently said. It will not hurt him at all. He is a millionaire.

Obvious alternatives would ameliorate Mexico’s deteriorating national security: increasing public investment in hydraulic infrastructure to reverse the effects of the last 20 years’ lack of investment;¹⁰ on-going campaigns to

Fox officials just continue to say that the problem of water will only be solved by privatizing the entire water distribution system, selling it off to national and international capital.

prevent the waste of water; establishing a national network of strict and honest water inspectors; building a system of small and medium-sized dams in every city suited for it; giving soft loans for building family cisterns to catch rainwater and for installing purification systems;¹¹ channeling funding into scientific and technological experimentation for desalinizing water and improving waste water treatment, among other initiatives.

All this would foster what the National Development Plan has not achieved: it would create massive numbers of jobs, diminish public insecurity, contribute to economic growth, improve the conservation and use of water, reduce technological dependence, limit poverty through jobs and strengthen public health by reducing illnesses attributable to the lack of pure drinking water and preventing epidemics among humans and animals. But, to do all this and to overcome other threats to national security, what is required is the vocation to be a statesman and not just a leader for a

six-year term, as has happened with this administration and the three previous ones, all of whom have been devotees of de-nationalizing change. Strengthening national sovereignty starts by recovering the three basic substances: air, water and food.

We hope that the National Development Plan of the next federal administration taking office in 2006 will make its programmatic statements jibe with the reality of society, in the general tenor of the phrase “facts, not words” (a phrase that belongs in U.S. government discourse) and that the upcoming administration will have an orientation and content that is more public than private, that defends national public interests over and above private national interests. ■■■

Respect and conservation of our natural surroundings and the satisfaction of basic social needs must be the guide and not simply economic growth that ultra-concentrates wealth and income.

NOTES

¹ Arturo Damm, “Del agua y la lección de economía: escritos de frontera,” *Este País* no. 171, June 2005, and Eduardo González, “Agua: los retos de su financiamiento,” *Investigación y Desarrollo* no. 193, supplement of *La Jornada*, June 2005. See the statements of former Salinas administration Secretary of Finance José Ángel Gurría, the “angel of dependence”, now an “expert” on drinking water and *de facto* spokesperson for the World Bank.

- ² Silvia Ribeiro, "Las caras de la privatización del agua," *La Jornada*, April 30, 2005, p. 29, and Angélica Enciso, "Organismos financieros internacionales fuerzan la privatización global del agua," *La Jornada*, June 30, 2005, p. 41.
- ³ The Valley of Mexico has 4,896 wells, half of which are exploited by private individuals or companies like real estate developers and industries. In 2004 alone, 110 transfers of water rights were granted because of the crisis growers are experiencing. See Emilio Fernández, "Compra-venta de pozos," *El Universal*, May 9, 2005, p. C10.
- ⁴ Luis Hernández Navarro, "Privatizar el agua," *La Jornada*, June 7, 2005, p. 23.
- ⁵ Américo Saldívar, "De la sustentabilidad ambiental a la sustentabilidad económica"; Michèle Chauvet, "Bioseguridad y seguridad alimentaria: políticas inaplazables"; and Yolanda Massieu, "Impactos sociales de la biotecnología agrícola en México: los cultivos transgénicos," José Luis Piñeyro, comp., *La seguridad nacional en México. Debate actual* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2004).
- ⁶ "Conflicto por el agua en la cuenca del Nilo," "Conflicto por el agua en las cuencas del Jordán, el Tigris-Eufrates y el Indo" and "La disputa de las riquezas de la tierra: Guerras internas por los minerales y la madera de construcción,"

Michael Klare, *Guerras por los recursos: el futuro escenario del conflicto global* (Barcelona: Urano Tendencias, 2003).

- ⁷ The voracity of the U.S. government and their farmers in attempting to push forward the quota of border water that Mexico must supply annually has been brutally demonstrated, as has the Fox administration's servile attitude despite protests by the governors of Mexican border states. In discussing possible scenarios, one Mexican specialist has concluded, "What is clear in this 'debtor/creditor' scenario is that the strategic character of water along the border is beginning to deepen the tensions of water policy and geo-politics that could be read as the beginning of the U.S. appropriation of at least most of the water there." Gian Carlo Delgado Ramos, "Agua y seguridad nacional," *Memoria* no. 194, April 2005, p. 13.
- ⁸ Poder Ejecutivo Federal, Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2001-2006 (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de México, 2001), pp. 128 and 133, the author's emphasis.
- ⁹ According to Maude Barlow, the president of the Council of Canadians, an NGO that opposes water privatization worldwide, today, 20 percent of Mexico's fresh water systems have been privatized in the last decade. The Fox government fostered this by creating the Program for Modernizing Water Operators (Promagua), which "established a national data base to help foreign corporations decide where they can

invest in water facilities in Mexico." In its balance sheet of Promagua, the National Bank of Public Works and Services considers private participation in water services a "futile discussion." Roberto González Amador, "Privatizado, 20% del servicio de agua," *La Jornada*, June 25, 2005, p. 43.

- ¹⁰ The Workers' Coordinating Commission of the National Water Commission and the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources wrote in a recently published document, "In the last 20 years, an average of U.S.\$2.4 billion a year should have been invested in the sector, but only one-third of that amount was actually forthcoming, and 12 percent of that budget was used for treating residual water, which explains to a great extent the bad results obtained from limited and badly applied budgets." Feliciano Hernández, "El gran negocio de las aguas mexicanas," *Forum* no. 145, June 2005.
- ¹¹ For example, the Chapingo University Graduate College invented a storage and purification system for rainwater. Javier Salinas, "Desarrollan proyecto para purificar y envasar agua de lluvia: beneficiará a tres millones de viviendas sin acceso a agua potable," *La Jornada*, April 12, 2005, p. 3a, and Antimio Cruz, "Hacen potable agua de lluvia," *El Universal*, April 12, 2005, p. 5C. Financial support to a national research plan for desalinization of sea water would be a strategic investment for Mexico's future, instead of immediately thinking of privatizing water.

The North American Booklets collection is an academic series aimed at the public interested in social, political, economic, demographic and, of course, foreign policy and international relations issues in North America. The series presents both well-documented timely analyses of current issues and theoretical, specialized reflections based on rigorous research.

For sale at Torre II de Humanidades, piso 10, Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City.
 Phones: (0115255) 5623-0311, 5623-0314 and 5623-0315 www.cisan.unam.mx