

The Fight Against Drug Traffic

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As a part of its national budget, Mexico spends more money fighting drug traffic than any other country in the hemisphere

Our country is thoroughly convinced that in order to win the war against drugs, the fight must be taken up in those places where drug use is rampant. The law of supply and demand teaches us that where there is a market, there will always be someone to supply it. Besides, the pressures on the nation to meet its debt payments prevent the government from devoting even more funds to the campaign against drug traffickers using Mexico as a platform to smuggle marijuana and cocaine into the U.S. Yet despite the economic crisis, enormous efforts have been made to check the flow. VOICES OF MEXICO's Jesús Yáñez presents a special report on Mexico's efforts to put an end to the drug flow.

From the time the current administration took office in December 1982, one of its main commitments has been to eradicate drug traffic. The government has applied serious broad-reaching preventive, educational, health and police measures aimed at eliminating drug consumption and trafficking in the country.

President Miguel de la Madrid often refers to the issue. It came up in a recent interview on both state and privately owned television. Referring specifically to allegations made by U.S. officials that corruption in Mexico is linked to drug traffic, De la Madrid stated:

"Not recognizing one's own problems and trying to find their roots in the problems of others is a human tendency. I have stated, and this is Mexican government policy, that drug trafficking is an international crime." He added that "each country must assume responsibility within its own territory, and among us we must develop mechanisms that facilitate cooperation to wage an efficient struggle against this outrageous delinquency. It is one of the main cancers of contemporary

society."

According to the *New York Times* on June 2, during 1985 U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency officials destroyed marijuana fields in the United States representing twice the amount supposedly planted in Mexico. Nonetheless, adds the *Times*, there are still over two thousand tons of U.S. grown marijuana ready for sale to the public.

In addition, in a front page article, reporter Joel Brinkley asserts that while the Reagan administration punishes Mexico for failing to control drug traffic, cocaine and marijuana production in the United States have reached their highest levels ever. According to statistics published in the U.S., some 20 to 25 million North Americans use drugs, out of a total population of close to 250 million.



Agents of the Attorney General's Office go after drug smugglers.

Photo by Herón Alemán; Imagen Latina.

FACTS, NOT WORDS

Over the last three years the Mexican government has permanently intensified its campaign against drug traffic. All together, the Mexican Army and Navy, and the Attorney General's Office, have assigned 45,000 men to the effort.

During this three year period, 90 per cent of the marijuana and poppy producing capacity has been destroyed, and 18,792 people, both nationals and foreigners, have been arrested. Authorities have confiscated 22,245 weapons of all sorts, and 230 landing strips have been located. Additionally, some 30 laboratories for processing opium paste to obtain cocaine, heroin and morphine, have been destroyed.

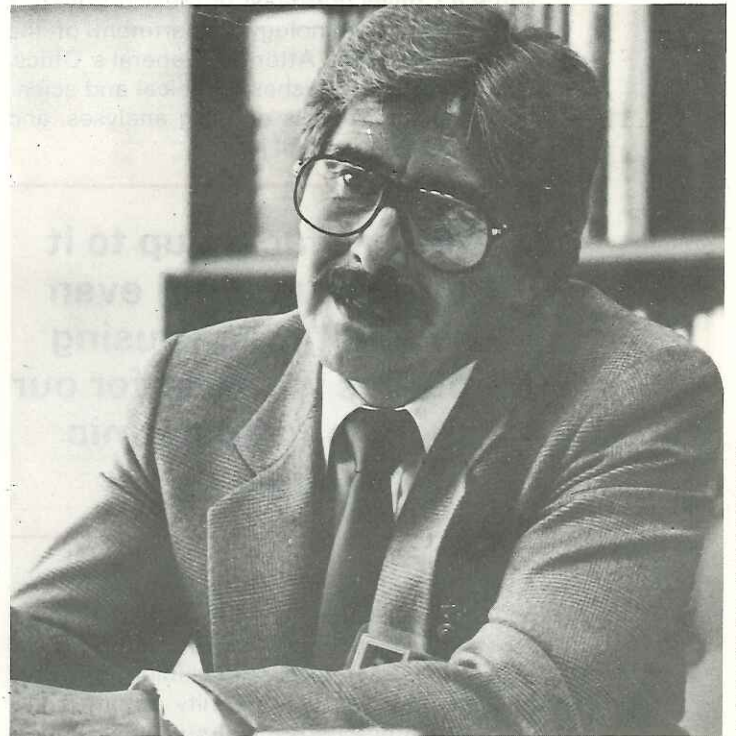
The struggle has had a high cost in human lives. The army has lost 318 men, the navy 25 and the Attorney General's Office, 43.

Secretary of the Navy, Miguel Angel Gómez Ortega, recently reported on the armada's activities against drug traffic on both the Pacific and the Gulf coasts. He stated that the daily cost to the Mexican government of the fight against drugs is close to 66 million pesos (approximately \$100,000). Secretary Gómez also reported that this year alone, nearly five tons of marijuana were detected on boats and destroyed. In 1985 the Mexican Navy burned 181,118 kilograms of marijuana and destroyed nine plantations with a total of 20,000 marijuana plants. The Navy also destroyed 180 kilograms of cocaine and confiscated 3,880 tablets of Qual, 2,440 tablets of Espacil Umm and 27 vials of the same product.

For its part, during the first half of 1986, the

Attorney General's Office destroyed 14,875 poppy plants on 1,306 hectares, and 242 plots of marijuana, on 441 hectares. This office also confiscated 22.9 kilograms of opium paste, 42 of poppy seed and 4.8 of heroin. As for marijuana by-products, officers confiscated 16,707 kilograms of dry grass, 407 of seed and 4.6 of hash.

The Attorney General's men also confiscated 28,895 psychotropic pills, as well as 2,650 kilograms of cocaine. In addition, they seized 207 long arms, 197 short arms and 10,708 bullets of different caliber. They also shut down four heroin processing laboratories.



Dr. Manuel Garduño, Director of Investigations in the State of Mexico.

Photo by Herón Alemán; Imagen Latina.

Without Marijuana

It used to be just about as easy as taking candy from a baby. But now, with the extremely strict drug control measures in force, the distribution of marijuana is definitely in crisis in the Federal District, Mexico's capital city.

According to Juan Gutiérrez Esparza, nicknamed "The Bird" because he "spends his whole life flying," and veteran of 20 years of marijuana trafficking, "when I started to smoke marijuana more than 20 years ago, I never had any problems getting it. But lately something strange is happening. The stuff is hard to

find and good marijuana is very expensive". Almost in jest, he explains, "now you've got to smoke four or five joints (marijuana cigarettes) to be able to feel any effect". Before, with just a few "toques" (puffs) you could get really high.

In the past, every city neighborhood had its two or three "conectes" (sellers). Now to buy any marijuana at all, you have to go outside the Federal District. Juan explains that he knows wholesalers that he can buy from in Cuernavaca, a city 70 kms. to the south of the capital. "A quarter of a pound costs me 30,000 pesos (about \$50.00 U.S.)," he says. With that investment he makes about a 50 to 60 percent profit selling in the Federal District,

"depending on the customer."

"The Bird" believes that one of the reasons the "stuff" is even scarcer than ever in the city is that it was consumed in large quantities by foreign visitors here for the World Soccer Cup. "Look man, when all those people were at the Independence Monument, celebrating when Mexico won a game...I saw Brazilians, Danes, Britons, French, Italians, everyone. They all had their nice-sized bags of dope. There was no problem. I saw them."

Nonetheless, "The Bird" acknowledges that while the fight against drug trafficking won't stop consumption or addiction, it has reduced the flow of marijuana to a trickle.

The Mexican Army has the best results in the struggle against drug traffic because it has more equipment and personnel. According to Secretary of Defense Juan Arévalo Gardoqui, during the present administration 264,654 poppy plants have been destroyed, as well as 130,700 marijuana plants, covering an area of 46,300 hectares. During the same period, 135 clandestine landing strips were located.

MODERNIZATION

The Mexican government has other important resources for its struggle against drug traffic. One of the best toxic laboratories in Latin America is located in Toluca, a city some 42 miles northeast of Mexico City. It is part of the Criminology Department of the State of Mexico's Attorney General's Office. The laboratory furnishes technical and scientific opinions, reports on drug analyses, and serves in the pursuit of justice.

"We are facing up to it (drug smuggling) even though it means using resources we need for our social and economic development"

Over \$1.5 million have been spent to modernize the lab's installations. It now has the most advanced equipment for drug-related research and analysis, including infra-red microscopes that can magnify a human hair up to 90 times its original size. Instruments have been added that can analyze marijuana, cocaine or heroin in 20 or 30 minutes, saving

valuable time. The laboratory is also equipped to identify over 900 different toxic substances.

Manuel Garduño Valdez, Director of Investigations for the Attorney General's Office of the State of Mexico, says Mexico has "some of the best equipment in the world" for use in the fight against drugs. He believes it is comparable to the FBI's in Los Angeles or New York, to Interpol's in France, and even to Scotland Yard's. Mr. Garduño adds that a group of 20 Mexican crime-fighters visited the North Carolina Criminal Research Institute last May to improve their technical skills in the struggle against crime and in drug-related research.

THE FORGOTTEN ONES

"The most common tests are for marijuana," says Fernando Lara Pastrana, who heads the lab. In his seven years at the post, he has done only one test for morphine. "A couple of years ago, two peasants from Michoacán crossed through the State of Mexico". The federal police arrested them because they found a plastic bag containing a white powder in the trunk of their car. The agents thought it could be some kind of drug.

"A closer search revealed they were also carrying sawed-off shotguns, machine-guns and pistols. They were interrogated. The vehicle was further searched, and two small bags were found containing a cocoa-like substance. I took samples from each of the bags to the lab in Toluca and processed them. As it turned out, the first bag contained ammonium nitrate, used to fertilize poppy plants. The content of the smaller bags was positively identified as morphine."



Tons of marijuana in a drug trafficker's camp in Chihuahua.

Creative Smugglers

Increasingly sophisticated methods to transport drugs, especially cocaine, are more and more sophisticated all the time. Evidence of the impressive resourcefulness of drug smugglers is a constant at the Mexico City airport.

"It's a display of tremendous ingenuity," claims Felipe Flores, spokesman for the Mexican Attorney General's office, one of the principal institutions involved in the fight against drug smuggling. He tells of how packets of cocaine have been transported in shaving cream cans, tooth paste tubes, lotion jars, perfume bottles and even shoe heels. In one case, for example, it was easy to detect the smuggling attempt because the persons's shoes had been specially made with exaggeratedly high heels to allow larger amounts to be transported. Upon investigation, it became clear that it wasn't just the heels that contained drugs, but also the soles!

Among the most sophisticated methods of transporting cocaine, and also one of the most dangerous,

since people play with their lives when they do it, is to swallow capsules packed with the drug. The capsules are made from surgical gloves. The thin rubber fingers are cut into small sections, stuffed with cocaine and sealed. Some "donkeys" (the term used to refer to people who transport drugs in this manner) have been found to have swallowed up to one hundred of these capsules.

Before transporting the "merchandise," these people prepare their stomachs using a base of bananas and oil. For the twenty-four hours before they travel, they ingest only water so as to avoid having to defecate and thus lose the capsules.

About two years ago, a woman of U.S. origin did not evacuate all of the capsules she had swallowed. She collapsed while visiting Mexico City's Museum of Fine Arts. People who saw her thought that she had fainted. But not so; she was dead. The autopsy revealed that one of the capsules had split, and even though the opening was only a few millimeters wide, it was sufficient for the cocaine to leak out. And that was enough to kill the woman. Usually when cocaine is transported in this manner, it is so pure that simple contact with

the digestive system provokes almost instant death.

Mexican drug enforcement agents who work at the capital city airport now have a system to detect this technique. As a flight arrives, and especially those from South America, passengers are observed via closed-circuit television. When someone behaves suspiciously, an agent will invite them to eat a cracker. They know that if the person has ingested cocaine capsules, they cannot accept because eating would cause them to defecate immediately. If someone refuses to eat a cracker, they are detained and sent to a hospital where the appropriate exams are carried out.

Even totally inhumane techniques are used to smuggle drugs. Recently a couple was traveling with a child eight to ten months of age. On simple observation, the child appeared to be asleep. But the woman acted strangely, in ways that caught the attention of the agents on duty. The couple was detained. In the course of the investigation, it became clear that the baby was dead. The couple had kidnapped the baby and murdered him, split him open along the back and stuffed him with several kilograms of

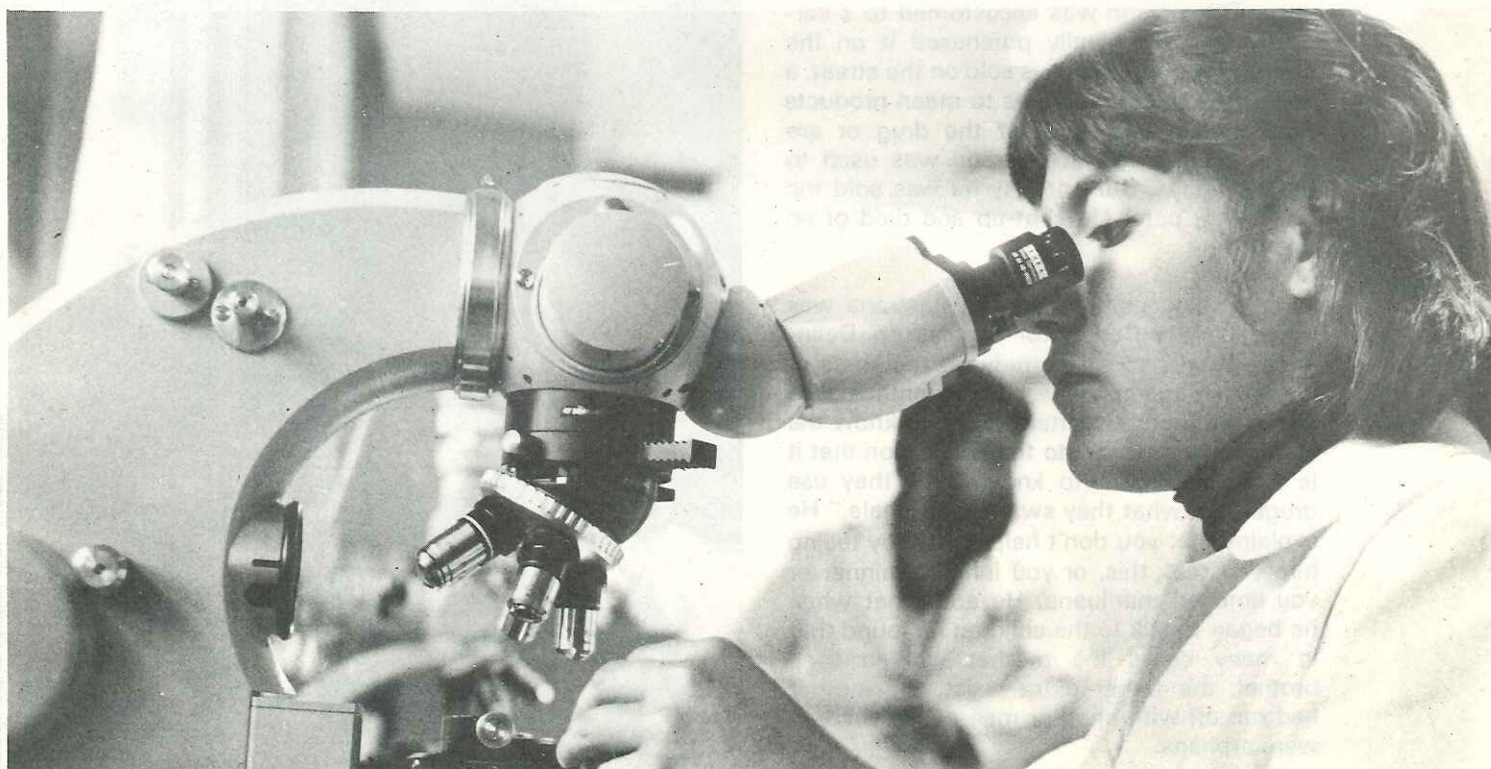
cocaine.

There are also other, more common methods of smuggling cocaine. These include filling radio batteries, or photographic or movie cameras with the drug. But perhaps the most difficult method for agents to detect is when a woman conceals the drug in her vagina.

One recent case was particularly unusual. Agents noted that all of the clothing - including socks, underwear, sweaters, shirts, pants, everything - in a passenger's suitcase was stiffly starched. The passenger was detained. When chemical analyses were performed on the clothing, tests showed that the "starch" was mostly cocaine. "It required a complicated chemical process," acknowledged the Attorney General office's spokesman. First, cocaine was mixed with water and certain chemicals to make the starch; if the delivery had been made, the process would then have been reversed to recover the drug. "If it hadn't been for the fact that all of the clothing was starched," commented Flores, "surely the cocaine would never have been detected."

Jesús Yáñez Orozco

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The new drug laboratory in Toluca, State of Mexico.

"Fortunately, we are too poor a country to actually consume drugs like cocaine and heroin," says Mr. Pastrana. Studies in Mexico have revealed that alcohol is the country's most harmful addiction. Marijuana comes second. He also explains why drug traffic is such a lucrative business, despite the government's efforts to bring it under control. The answer lies in the country's economic crisis.

Taking drugs such as cocaine and heroin across the border is highly lucrative due to the devaluation of the peso. Marijuana is the most common drug smuggled across because more of it is produced in the country.

According to Lara Pastrana, young people in the United States can afford to buy all kinds of drugs. "I believe," he says, "that seeking new things and sensations is a problem common to all of humanity, it is not just North Americans. They resort to drugs. They find pleasure and satisfaction in drugs. The same thing happens in other industrialized countries."

Thus, he believes that drug addiction exists in relation to the individual's social environment. "If you offer me alcohol and I don't buy it, that means there's no market for it. The problem is that so long as there is a demand for whatever, be it alcohol, heroin or LSD, there will always be corruption, addiction, trafficking from one country to another, etc."

Mr. Lara Pastrana also speaks of the sorrow he feels for the "hundreds of thousands who die because of drugs, from one moment to the next, perhaps without even realizing what is happening. Maybe they never realize it. Not even when death calls..." He told me of a case. This person was accustomed to a certain dose and usually purchased it on the street. But only "trash" is sold on the street, a term used by drug addicts to mean products that contain very little of the drug or are highly diluted. So this person was used to having his fix. But one day he was sold the real thing, pure. He shot-up and died of an overdose.

Two or three years ago, Lara Pastrana was asked by the Center for Studies on Delinquent Minors to do a study on the kinds of drugs that minors take. "I was enthusiastic about the job." But after getting to know the youngsters, he came to the conclusion that it is more important to know "why they use drugs than what they swallow or inhale." He explains that you don't help a child by telling him you took this, or you inhaled thinner or you smoked marijuana. He adds that when he began to talk to the children he found that in many cases the mother worked in a brothel, the father didn't exist, the mother had run off with another man or the children were orphans.

"Thus," he says, "we can't expect these

children to be nice and kind, to integrate themselves into society, when the social system is what made them marginal in the first place."

He also spoke of a special situation that can arise from the use of hard drugs such as morphine. When a pregnant woman shoots up, the morphine affects the child because the placenta doesn't block this drug. The child then has "withdrawl symptoms" when it is born.

After taking a drug the body "feels well," and since it feels so good, it asks for more. When it doesn't get what it wants, colics, headaches, muscle aches, etc. result. He compares this situation to a hangover. When one tries to get rid of the ravages of the night before, the custom is to take some kind of mixed drink, rum and coke, for example, or to have two or three beers. "So, what is it I'm doing? Getting drunk all over again. The same happens with drugs: I shoot up again. Morphine soothes me, I feel well. Once the effect of the drug has passed, my body says: what's up?, I want more. So I have to give it more, more each time."

So, in a nutshell, this is what we call a withdrawal symptom. "I feel like part of my body is missing," if I don't get the drug, says Mr. Pastrana.



Burning marijuana in Chihuahua.

A MULTINATIONAL STRUGGLE

"Drug traffic in Mexico," states President De la Madrid, "derives from increasing consumption in the industrialized countries." During a visit to the northern Mexican city of Culiacán, Sinaloa, the President added that the governments of the industrialized countries "have been unable to control their own drug problem; general drug consumption and drug addiction are on the increase." These countries "don't know how to control the flow of drugs coming in from other countries, either."

President De la Madrid said clearly: "We are not trying to avoid our own responsibility; we are facing up to it even though it means using resources we need for our social and economic development." "We would hope that other countries would allocate proportional resources to fighting drug traffic. Mexico could go much further in the struggle against this modern-day social cancer if this were so." Currently, Mexico's foreign debt is around \$95 billion, the second largest in Latin America, out of a total \$370 billion owed by the region.

Attorney General Sergio García Ramírez, for his part, delivered a severe criticism of those who say that drug traffic and corruption are unique to Mexico. Speaking at a press con-

ference with foreign correspondents last May 23, García Ramírez said: "With all due respect to other countries, we believe that the production, transport, supply or consumption (of drugs), implies inefficiency on the part of those in charge of prosecuting these crimes. There may even be corruption."

He added, "I wouldn't dare make general, abstract accusations of corruption. In order to say that corruption exists I would have to say where, who and how I can prove such a thing. I cannot just claim it because I don't have honest, serious facts to sustain such a statement."

Mr. García Ramírez also referred to the joint struggle being waged by the United States and Mexico against drug traffic. "I believe that rather than something that divides us, this struggle should bring us together. Unlike other issues in our bilateral relations, in which opinions are expressed freely, autonomously and rationally, in the case of the campaign against drugs, there shouldn't be, there cannot be a difference of opinion." And he added: "To the best of my knowledge, and I believe I am well informed on the subject, neither the government nor the people of the United States, nor the government and people of Mexico, intend to see drug traffic go unpunished."★

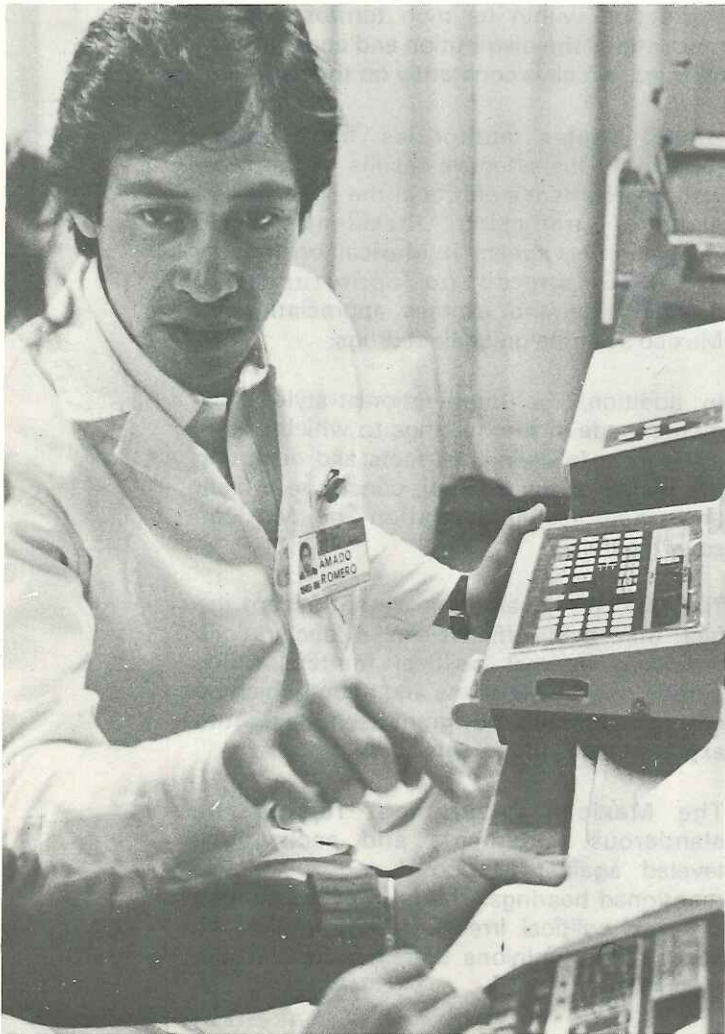


Photo by Herón Alemán; Imagen Latina.

Modern equipment for drug detection.

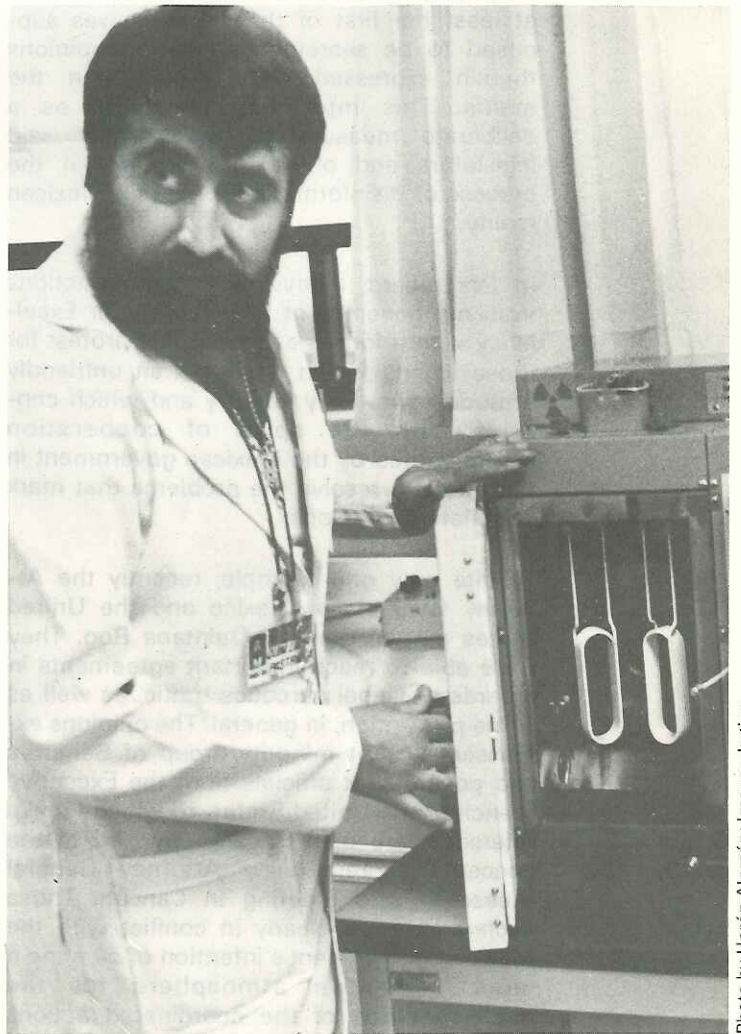


Photo by Herón Alemán; Imagen Latina.

The most modern lab in Latin America.