

Mexico and Worldwide Challenges On the Threshold of the New Millennium

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Man is at a crossroads, faced with the choice between continuing on the same path he has been traveling or changing course. For that reason, this is an appropriate moment to draw up a balance sheet of the world's situation, assess its future and propose the policies and actions we should set into motion.

To evaluate the challenges that must be faced in the next millennium, we have to look at the current situation of the international community.

Since 1989 we have been going through the third stage of the international order that emerged from the Second World War, characterized by instability and uncertainty. We have witnessed turning points in history, like the fall of the Berlin Wall; the implosion and fragmentation of the Soviet Union and the rise of a Russia convulsed by its own economic conversion while it tries to contain the new and remaining centrifugal tendencies with an authoritarian, opportunistic and negligent leadership; the resurgence of "Greater Germany" under the protection of the United States and with the complicity of the former European powers, busy with the construction of the European Union aimed at recovering their world leadership; the annexation of the German Democratic Republic by the Federal Republic of Germany; the dissolution of the socialist bloc; the continuance of essentially strategic military bipolarity, and therefore, of a certain degree of detente.

The war economy of the United States is in full flower, with its military budget practically untouched and a growing interventionist impetus; the industrialized countries are submissive and obedient toward the United States, opportunistically cashing in on relative benefits. At the same time, worldwide problems and conflicts—like nationalism and revenge-seeking—are deepening, some caused, fostered or exacerbated by structural adjustments to the international system, and capitalized on by the leaders of the ruling ideology, not only to avoid their own self-criticism and correction of their mistakes, but to actually accentuate their domination. This is possible because the great majority of those who suffer the effects of all this labor under groundless illusions; they are either indecisive and tolerant or simply unable to join forces to stop subsidizing the wealth and power of a privileged minority.

The United Nations, with no real autonomy or authority, is held hostage by the great powers. Since its reform is not progressing, there is a grave and imminent danger that it will continue on the road of increasing gentrification laid out by the United States and its main allies, and that it will further boost its opposition to complete compliance with the essential tenets laid down in the preamble of its own charter.

RICH COUNTRIES' PERSPECTIVE

In international society, just as in individual countries, perspectives vary according to the position of the observer.

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For a privileged minority, the world is moving ahead, progress is being made and expectations are high. For another minority —not always so privileged— that of those who think it is better to close your eyes and not notice anything, things are just fine the way they are.

However, for the vast majority of people, things continue to get worse. Some of them fight to better their lot, but most have resigned themselves to their fate, thinking nothing can be done.

From the rich nations' point of view, the only countries with problems are the ones that refuse to adopt the wealthy nations' paradigm, or cannot manage to implement it properly, thus making it inappropriate or even immoral to lend them aid.

Untiring spokespersons for the wealthy countries spread the new Gospel among the less developed nations: history has concluded with the imposition of capitalism; this is the era of neoliberalism and globalization; the nation-state is on the road to extinction, given that sovereignty no longer exists and the rich benefactors of international society have the right to intervene whenever, wherever and however they consider it prudent for supposedly "humanitarian" reasons and to continue to mold the world to their whim. Clear examples of compliance with this "sacred civilizing mission" are Haiti, Liberia and the former Yugoslavia.

This new massive interventionism comes on the tail of the interventionism practiced openly for more than two decades by the United States and its developed partners through the international financial agencies headed up by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and their select clubs of Paris and London, along with the merciless, inhuman imposition of structural adjustment on all their debtors by conditioning funding.

DEPENDENT COUNTRIES' PERSPECTIVE

Meanwhile, the weak countries struggle to survive, albeit without joining forces, more spurred on by an instinct for self-preservation than by

conviction. The strong continue inflexibly and in concert to oppose these efforts and even enjoy the support of some of the weak countries for their policies.

The United States and the developed world have managed to turn the foreign debt of the developing countries —a debt they themselves induced— into an bottomless well of resources to continue to finance their privileges, regardless of the fact that this permanent burden is heavy indeed for those countries that have to carry it.

In 1997, the total foreign debt of developing countries came to almost U.S.\$2.2 trillion.¹ The 41 countries most affected by this are classified as the very indebted poor countries, 33 of them

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in Africa. Their debt, which came to U.S.\$245 billion in 1996, overwhelms their public budgets, absorbs the resources needed for human development and stunts economic growth. Their ability to provide food and health and educational care to their peoples is particularly affected.

Official sources state that as of June 30, 1999, Mexico's foreign debt came to U.S.\$160.078 billion, or 35 percent of its gross domestic product; U.S.\$97.025 billion (60.6 percent) was owed by the public sector and U.S.\$63.053 billion (39.4 percent) by the private sector.

The poorest countries' debt has skyrocketed since 1980, two-thirds of it resulting either from interest or prior debt. The nature of the debt has also changed: in 1980, more than half of all debt was owed by the private sector, while by 1997, it only owed one-fifth. The current debt crisis involves the increasing public debt owed to multilateral institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.

Under the current world order, international bodies —among them, the U.S. champion, the IMF, the World Bank, the European Develop-

ment Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank—must promote the interests of the United States and make sure they prevail. Otherwise, they would be destined to disappear or be ostracized.

As of February 28, 1999, member states owed the United Nations a total of U.S.\$2.948 billion: U.S.\$1.7 billion for peace keeping, U.S.\$1.1 billion for operating expenses and U.S.\$148 million for international tribunals. The United States alone, the UN's largest debtor, owes two-thirds of all this: U.S.\$1.7 billion for the normal operating budget and U.S.\$1.07 billion for peacekeeping and international tribunals.²

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A NEW INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

The main challenge of our time is building an egalitarian, just, advanced international society. This would mean an international order in which all peoples would effectively have the opportunity of participating in all aspects and stages of the process, particularly in decision making, as well as the security and guarantee that they would be able to achieve similar conditions of real, lasting development in all spheres and for all individuals.

This means that world health must be enhanced by looking at all sensitive areas, including Man and his environment. And, that involves taking on tasks such as the preservation of the biosphere, biodiversity and our cultural and natural patrimony, severely hampered and endangered by inequality, poverty and marginalization; hunger and disease; the arms race and war.

New and more vigorous action in favor of a real restructuring of the international order is

needed, above all by countries like Mexico which enjoy an international reputation as defenders and promoters of the rule of law, justice, peace and development, a country which on not a few occasions has put a stop to the plans of its powerful neighbor, only to suffer the consequences.

CONCLUSIONS

We cannot allow the developed nations to shape international society to their liking alone. The policies our countries implement must include concrete actions that successfully meet the fundamental challenge of our time; we must participate in the deliberations of international bodies which have these powers, such as the Security Council, in order to defend the interests of the majority of the world's nations.

Developing countries, particularly the most advanced, like Mexico, must be self-critical and recognize that we have allowed, tolerated and not infrequently been accomplices in our own misfortune and that, therefore, we bear a great share of the responsibility for it. We must be aware that we have to develop the will to work for real change and leave behind the comfort of indolence, given that the developed countries are not going to give up or share their privileges voluntarily.

Today's inertia leads only to a worsening of the inequality and arbitrary nature of international power relations and the increase and sharpening of risks, not only because of the use of weapons of mass destruction, but due to the progressive, accelerated deterioration of the environment. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, "La deuda: necesidad de tomar medidas en forma acelerada," *Informe sobre desarrollo humano 1999* (Madrid: Ediciones Mundi-Prensa, 1999), p. 107.

² United Nations, *The UN financial crisis* (New York: Department of Public Information, August 25, 1999).