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FEATURED Q&A

How Prepared Are the Region's Countries for Epidemics?

Q The number of confirmed deaths from Haiti's cholera epidemic has surged to 442, health officials in the Caribbean country said Wednesday, adding that the total number of cases has risen to 6,742. This year has also seen outbreaks of other diseases in the Americas, including dengue fever. What do the incidents say about the region's ability to handle such epidemics? Have resources to fight the cholera and other outbreaks been put to work in an effective manner? Have the Pan American Health Organization, pharmaceutical companies, health ministries and NGOs done enough to get ahead of such outbreaks?

A **Mirta Roses Periago, director of the Pan American Health Organization:** "In public health we often say that 'diseases know no borders,' and pathogens attack regardless of race, ethnicity and class. Epidemics have always existed and great progress has been made in trying to predict them as people will recall with the last flu epidemic. It is not yet possible to avoid epidemics completely, but we can do much to anticipate them by carefully examining historic trends and sharing information worldwide to learn from others. The earlier suspected cases are detected, the better we can contain the spread of disease and reduce damage. Countries have incorporated a systematic follow-up of rumors to be able to identify potential outbreaks. The largest epidemic in the past two years, the H1N1

influenza pandemic, affected people of all walks of life in rich and poor countries around the world. But when diseases like cholera reach epidemic proportions in the Americas, it generally happens in lower-income countries (or poorer areas within countries) and is largely the result of poverty, degraded environments, lack of proper sanitation and weak health systems. Are we prepared for epidemics? Certainly more than in the past. The Pan American Health Organization has been working with member countries to strengthen

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Colombian Senate Confirms Córdoba's Ouster From Chamber

Colombia's Senate on Wednesday voted to expel lawmaker Piedad Córdoba, confirming an earlier order from the country's Inspector General's office. Córdoba is accused of improper contact with the FARC. See story on page 2.

File Photo: Colombian Government.

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NEWS BRIEFS

Fifth U.S. Citizen Killed in Ciudad Juárez in Six Days

Two students from the University of Texas at El Paso were attacked in a car Tuesday and fatally shot in Ciudad Juárez, the Associated Press reported. The death of Eder Diaz, 23, early Wednesday marks the fifth U.S. citizen killed in the Mexican border city in six days and the deadliest week for Americans in Mexico since Feb. 1. Also on Wednesday, Mexican authorities discovered a mass "narco grave" near Acapulco with the bodies of at least 18 presumed victims of the country's bloody drug war.

Paraguay Titanium Deposit May Be World's Largest: Discoverer

A titanium field in Paraguay could be the world's largest deposit of the mineral, said the American explorer who discovered the deposit, Bloomberg News reported today. David Lowell, 82, the president of **CIC Resources** controls the rights to at least 457,000 acres at the site of the deposit, according to the South American country's sub-ministry of mining and energy. "Our deposit could control the world titanium market, a big enough piece of production that whoever operates it would dictate what the price is going to be," Lowell told the news service in an interview.

Barbadians Mourn Death of Prime Minister David Thompson

Thousands gathered in Bridgetown, Barbados Wednesday to bid farewell to Prime Minister David Thompson, who died Oct. 23 after a yearlong battle with pancreatic cancer, the Associated Press reported. Mourners lined the streets as Thompson's flag-draped coffin was driven in a white hearse to the Kensington Oval cricket stadium for a state funeral.

Economic News**Brazil's Rousseff Aims to Cut Debt to 38 Percent of GDP**

Brazilian President-elect Dilma Rousseff said Wednesday that she aims to cut the country's debt to 38 percent of gross domestic product by the end of her term in 2014, Bloomberg News reported. The goal can be achieved based on the government's growth acceleration program, which she helped draft as chief of staff to



Lula met with Rousseff Wednesday at Planalto Palace in Brasília.

Photo: Rousseff Campaign.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The country's annual growth is forecast to be 4.5 percent, with a 4.5 percent rate of inflation and budget surpluses before interest amounting to 3.3 percent of GDP for 2011-2014, the period of her term, said Rousseff. "This is a forecast for 2011 to 2014, no one makes projections for the year," Rousseff said in Brasília. "It is not for 2011, because if it were for 2011 we would have to halt all investments, all social programs." Reducing debt would allow the country's benchmark interest rate to fall to levels common in developed countries, she said. Rousseff on Tuesday named former Finance Minister Antonio Palocci, Vice President-elect Michael Turner, Workers Party head José Eduardo Dutra and Congressman José Cardozo to her transition team.

Political News**Colombian Senate Expels Opposition Senator Córdoba**

Colombia's Senate on Wednesday

expelled opposition lawmaker Piedad Córdoba, confirming action taken in September by the country's Inspector General's office, EFE reported. The Inspector General's office on Sept. 27 ordered that Córdoba be removed from office for alleged "collaboration" with the Revolutionary Armed Forces, or FARC, rebel group. Córdoba has denied any improper contact with the FARC, saying that her meetings with rebels were authorized by the government. Córdoba also said she provided Colombian officials with a videotape of her meeting with FARC second-in-command Raúl Reyes, who was killed in a March 2008 raid. Córdoba has helped secure the release of a dozen hostages held by the rebels. Senate President Armando Benedetti could have delayed formalizing Córdoba's ouster from the chamber for 10 working days. However, he said that two hours of debate on the subject was enough to warrant her expulsion. Some senators have argued the Inspector General's office had no right to oust Córdoba, who represents the impoverished Choco province in Colombia's northwest. Córdoba continues to maintain her innocence and is vowing to pursue all legal methods to return to the Senate, sources on her staff told EFE.

Former Peruvian Finance Minister Aráoz Enters Race for President

Former Peruvian Finance Minister Mercedes Aráoz on Wednesday entered the race to succeed President Alan García, Bloomberg News reported. Aráoz, who stepped down from her cabinet position

“I've always been in the center, where one doesn't believe the market can solve everything and where there's proper state intervention.”

— Mercedes Aráoz

in September, is running as the candidate of García's Apra party. "One must seek a balance between economic coherence and

public policies to make sure more people enjoy the benefits of that growth," Aráoz said in an interview on the Radio Programas network. "I've always been in the center, where one doesn't believe the market can solve everything and where there's proper state intervention." Aráoz, 49, has a master's degree from the University of Miami. During her eight

months running the Finance Ministry, Aráoz managed Peru's \$3 billion fiscal stimulus package, which the central bank said has put the country's economy on a path to grow as much as 8 percent this year. Before being named to the Finance Ministry, Aráoz was the country's foreign commerce and tourism minister, a post she had held since 2006. Other candidates

vying to be the country's next president include Lima Mayor Luis Castañeda Lossio and Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of former President Alberto Fujimori.

Company News

Itaú Unibanco Reports 18 Percent Increase in Third Quarter Profit

Brazil's **Itaú Unibanco Holding**, the country's largest bank by market value, on Wednesday reported an 18 percent increase in profit for the third quarter, Bloomberg News reported. The bank's adjusted net income, excluding one-time charges, rose to 3.2 billion reais (\$1.87 billion), or 70 centavos per share, the bank said in a regulatory filing. The average forecast of five analysts in a Bloomberg survey was for adjusted net income of 3.31 billion reais. In October, the São Paulo-based bank concluded the integration of all branches of Itaú and Unibanco, which negatively affected results for the quarter, Eduardo Nishio, an analyst at **BTG Pactual** wrote to clients in an Oct. 29 note. The bank's loan portfolio grew 17 percent year-on-year in the third quarter to 313.19 billion reais and total assets rose 12 percent to 686.25 billion reais, Itaú Unibanco said. The bank added that its average default rate—a payment delay of more than 90 days—dropped to 4.3 percent at the end of September as compared to 5.9 percent a year ago. The bank's net income without any adjustments rose 33 percent to 3.03 billion reais.

Telecom Argentina Reports 47% Increase in Profits for Third Quarter

Telecom Argentina said Wednesday that its profit for the third quarter increased 47 percent as compared to the same period a year ago, Bloomberg News reported. The company posted a profit of 444 million pesos (\$112 million) for the quarter, an increase from 303 million pesos in the third quarter of 2009. Gains in the company's Internet business drove sales in the quarter, said CEO Franco Bertone. Telecom Argentina's sales increased 18 percent to 10.5 billion pesos for the year through September.

Featured Q&A

Continued from page 1

national capacity and international cooperation in disease surveillance, reporting and control. We have also supported pandemic planning and preparedness efforts prompted in part by fears of the highly virulent H5N1 'bird flu' virus. The 2009–10 H1N1 influenza pandemic revealed that all these efforts have at least partially paid off, but most countries still have a long way to go before they are fully prepared to confront a major public health emergency. The health sector is generally underfunded throughout the region. Strengthening public health systems and expanding health coverage are the top health challenges facing nearly every country in the Americas. This requires sustained and adequate funding from both national and international sources, and a commitment to reducing the inequalities in health that make our entire hemisphere less secure."

A Katherine E. Bliss, deputy director and senior fellow of the Global Health Policy Center and senior fellow of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

"International experts are helping Haitian officials identify cases, treat patients within newly established cholera centers and prevent the spread of the disease through the use of chlorine solutions to treat drinking water. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean face persistent disease challenges, such as yellow fever and dengue fever in addition to cholera, even as they confront emerging diseases, such as H1N1 influenza.

However, a number of important regional efforts to improve disease surveillance, prevention and response are underway. The new Caribbean Public Health

“A number of important regional efforts to improve disease surveillance, prevention and response are underway.”

— Katherine E. Bliss

Agency will prioritize work on health emergency preparedness and disease surveillance, while the Unasur Council on Health is working to strengthen research and laboratory capacities in South America. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control is working with partners in Central America to promote disease surveillance networks through the Field Epidemiology Training Program. And the Pan American Health Organization's revolving fund ensures the availability of crucial vaccines to member states at affordable prices. In 2009, Brazil's Fundação Oswaldo Cruz and pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline agreed to jointly research and develop vaccines for regionally relevant diseases, such as dengue and pneumococcal disease. The countries of the Americas have a long history of shared scientific research and cooperation on disease outbreaks. Despite ongoing and emerging chal-

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Featured Q&A*Continued from page 3*

allenges, they are in a good position to further strengthen regional collaboration on health and well-being."

A Ricardo Izurieta, assistant professor in the Department of Global Health at the University of South Florida: "Cholera is a disease that can be transmitted through water or contaminated food. In Haiti, national and international institutions have implemented a drinking water program that will certainly help to avoid massive outbreaks and be able to manage the treatment of the cases properly. Nevertheless, *Vibrio cholerae* is a bacterium that will try to find its natural reservoir in brackish waters. It is plausible to think that bays and estuaries may be already 'seeded' by this bacterium. *V. cholerae* has been found in estuarine environments along with the resident plankton and crustaceans, including shrimps, shellfish and crabs. If that is the case, potentially contaminated fish and seafood may become the vehicles of transmission in the re-emergence of cholera. The consumption of contaminated food was a major contributor to cholera spread during the 1991 epidemic in South America. Consumption of marinated or dry seafood was associated with increased risk of cholera infection. Also, it has been proved that cholera can be transmitted during burial ceremonies in which food is provided. Health education should include advice to the communities to avoid eating raw or semi-cooked fish or seafood during communal feasts. It is plausible to think that cholera in Haiti can re-emerge associated with cultural and religious practices. Once cholera establishes itself as an endemic disease in Haiti, we should expect a new spread of the disease to all vulnerable areas of Latin America and the Caribbean."

A Elaine Scheye, president of the Scheye Group Ltd. Global Health Care Advisory Services in Chicago: "The problem is one of foresight and planning for disas-

ters before they happen. In countries that suffer from long-term devastating poverty, it is all the more important that public health officials and pharmaceutical companies step up to the plate, which requires putting in place ongoing public health programs that include prevention through inoculation programs against communicable diseases and public health education rather than emergency responses to epidemics and severe loss of lives. Prevention programs require good planning, public education regarding

“Everyone shares in the blame for this outbreak.”

— Elaine Scheye

hygiene and a ready supply of vaccines and other medications to minimize loss of lives. In countries that experience such devastating poverty, maintenance of decent levels of health care and sanitation become even more important. The region's continuing health problems stem from poverty and perhaps lack of scientific know-how in order to put into place preventative health services that include public health awareness, including patient education. There is plenty of blame to go around. Everyone shares in the blame for this outbreak. No one comes out looking good. Certainly big pharmaceutical companies can well afford to donate drugs to stem further loss of lives. Even donating drugs, big pharmaceutical companies continue to realize profits so it is not a huge burden on them to assume their fair share. Governments and public health officials must work with drug makers on an ongoing basis to prevent such outbreaks and share knowledge in order to minimize their devastation on human lives."

The Advisor welcomes reactions to the Q&A above. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org with comments.

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