

Mexico ripe for revolution

MEXICO CITY — As I sipped vintage Dom Perignon in a palatial mansion in this city's most elegant quarter, it was difficult to escape the feeling that this is what Russia must have been like before the revolution.

Outside the walls of the mansion, with its scores of servants and dancing fountains, danger lurked. When I went for a walk, a car with a driver armed with a sub-machinegun was assigned to follow me at a discreet distance — “for my security.”

Today, Mexico has 85 million people. In another 10 years, the figure will reach 110 million. This huge, arid country of mountains and deserts is fast running out of water and arable land to support its surging population.

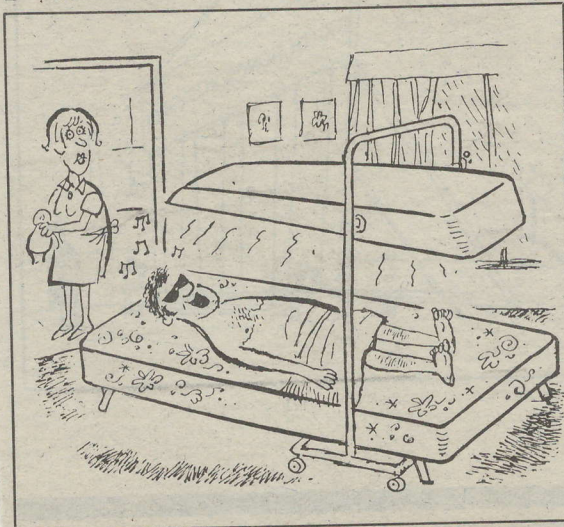
Mexico City, with 18 million residents, is already an ecological disaster zone with almost every type of lethal pollution known to man. By the year 2000, its population is expected to reach 31 million — the world's largest urban zone.

The new reformist government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari must quickly solve the twin problems of an exploding population and the need to find jobs for an onrushing tide of young people before Mexico erupts in a revolution that could turn it into a Latin American Iran.

An important step in tackling these immense problems was taken this week when Salinas and U.S. President George Bush agreed in Washington to begin negotiating a free trade pact based on the one concluded between Canada and the U.S. The goal of such an agreement would be a vast free market “from the Yukon to the Yucatan” that would compete against a united Europe.

Ironically, many Americans have greeted the notion of a U.S.-Mexico free-trade pact with the same deep dismay as Canadians did over the U.S.-Canada agreement. American unions fear that cheaper Mexican labor will take jobs away from the U.S. Manufacturers in the U.S. worry that lower cost Mexican imports will hurt their sales. And there is widespread concern that the current flood of Mexican immigrants into the U.S. will

Punch



“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine . . .”

ERIC MARGOLIS



increase by an order of magnitude.

In spite of such alarms, free — or freer — trade seems inevitable. Mexico is America's third largest trading partner after Canada and Japan. The U.S. is Mexico's largest export market. The two neighbors did US\$51 billion in trade last year.

As in the case of Canada, a formal pact will simply confirm what already exists and speed the gradual reduction of tariff and investment barriers. No one in the U.S. or Mexico is quite sure how all of this is going to work out, just as Canadians can't yet determine whether free trade will be a boon, a threat to national sovereignty or a big non-event.

Even murkier is the question of how Mexico-U.S. free trade will affect Canada. Will Mexican goods become cheaper for Canadians? Will bus lines open service from Tijuana to Windsor, bringing in thousands of Mexican immigrants?

On top of all this is the looming problem of agricultural chemicals. Mexico's main export is agricultural goods. Nearly all of these are treated with a variety of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides that are causing deep concern among health professionals in the U.S. and Canada. Many agricultural chemicals banned in North America are widely used in Mexico.

Neither U.S. nor Canadian authorities have the manpower, budget or testing programs to prevent the entry of tainted produce from Mexico — or anywhere else, for that matter.

Besides these very real concerns over health and economics, there remains the pressing issue of politics. Unless Mexico gets more access to the rich North American markets, and vents its excess population through immigration to *El Norte*, it's almost inevitable that a popular revolution will erupt within a few years.

Mexico has one of the world's worst distributions of wealth. The poor are dirt poor and the rich are very, very rich. Worse, Mexico's oligarchy, which controls the government behind a thin facade of democratic institutions, ostentatiously flaunts its wealth and power with little regard to the teeming masses of poor. High walls, barbed wire and squads of *pistoleros* keep the poor at bay while the rich fly off to party in the U.S. and Europe.

This is precisely the poisonous climate that existed in Iran during the days of the shah and which produced the Iranian revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.

In some remote Mexican mountain village a Khomeini surely awaits, ready to deliver the long-suffering Mexican people from their misery.

If and when this happens, as Mexican history so often shows, the explosion could be massive and extremely bloody. That's why both the U.S. and Canada need so urgently to help President Salinas in his race against the clock.