

## IT IS POVERTY THAT KILLS PEOPLE--NOT RAIN

*TIJUANA: The shanty towns are creations of economic pressure, human desperation and government indifference.*

By JORGE R. MANCILLAS

At least 30 lives have been lost in Tijuana and thousands have been left homeless by the recent storms, yet this tragedy is not the result of a natural disaster. It is the predictable consequence of years of government indifference toward the living conditions of the hundreds of thousands of people who have flocked to Tijuana from economically depressed areas of Mexico.

I speak from experience. My family migrated more than 40 years ago from Durango to Ensenada, bringing nothing but their hopes for a better life. The first of their children born in Baja California, I witnessed Tijuana grow from a small city of 100,000 to a dynamic metropolis of 2 million, fed by a human flood from rural southern and central Mexico.

These economic refugees were--and still are--drawn by the dream of crossing to the United States or finding work in the industries that have been created along the border since the 1960s.

Most of the new arrivals live in giant squatter settlements or colonias, neighborhoods that have sprung up largely without planning or permission--or municipal services. Their houses are perilously perched on the sides of steep hills, just as their existence is perched on the edge of economic survival. They settle there for a reason. Arriving with nothing and unable to afford decent housing, they deliberately build on

places that have no value to developers--hillsides, canyons and riverbeds.

Even if, like my family, they are able to prosper, it is a long path to a safe existence. In 1978, I was fortunate to live in an apartment on Ensenada's Floresta avenue, in a neighborhood with running water, electricity and paved streets. No street drainage, though. Our pleas to the government after minor floods went unheeded. That year, rainfall was twice the normal average of 14.8 inches. I remember vividly the night we had to evacuate our apartment. Carrying my 1-year old daughter in my arms, I waded anxiously through a knee-high torrent of muddy water as rain poured over our heads. We were fortunate to have family who sheltered us and helped us recover from our losses. But hundreds of people who lived in shanties on the hillsides of Ensenada and neighboring Tijuana lost everything that winter; many lost their lives.

The government is aware of the perilous living conditions of many of its citizens. In 1973, Baja's Gov. Milton Castellanos launched an ambitious project that supposedly would resolve once and for all the chronic problem of flooding and mudslides that afflicted Tijuana. The centerpiece was to be a flood-control channel on the Tijuana River, into which a giant system of street drainage would feed.

The project was baptized *Todo por Nuevo Tijuana* ( Anything for a New

Tijuana) and they meant it. Along the riverbed was a long and narrow shantytown known as Cartolandia (Cardboardland), home to 30,000 people. Without warning, the army surrounded Cartolandia and evacuated its residents, who were "illegally occupying federal property." Bulldozers rushed in to destroy their humble dwellings. Left homeless, 10,000 of them occupied a steep hillside on the outskirts of town, huddled together under pieces of plastic to protect themselves from the rain.

That winter of 1973-74, I and other student activists joined them in their efforts to build a self-reliant community, Colonia Tierra y Libertad. Starting with nothing, they built streets, a small school, a clinic, a market and bakery and other cooperative projects. The government responded by sending the army to drive them out, and, using flamethrowers, soldiers burned the colonia to the ground. I know of a baby who was burned alive and an old man who died of exposure in the hills where the residents had scattered. The colonia's leaders were jailed and tortured. "They challenged the principle of authority," was Gov. Castellanos' explanation.

What did Tijuana get at such a high human price? A flood-control channel on the Tijuana River that allowed developers to build an adjacent industrial, commercial and recreational complex, complete with shops, hotels, restaurants and discos, where the wealthy dine, shop, play and dance. The urban development project never extended beyond this complex. The squatter settlements kept growing, their people battered by the winter rains.

Although now I am watching familiar scenes of death and despair from a

safe distance, literally and figuratively, I am filled with the same anger and frustration I have felt over the last 20 years. I feel bitter when I hear Mexican government officials boast of their rescue efforts keeping the toll relatively low. I am reminded of Cartolandia and Tierra y Libertad, and of the hundreds of people whose lives, like tears in the rain, have been washed away under the tide of government corruption and indifference.

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**Jorge R. Mancillas** is an assistant professor of anatomy and cell biology at the UCLA School of Medicine and a member of the Mexican-American Political Assn.