

H. Y. Jones (7/28/84)

Brazil, in a Policy Shift, Backs Family Planning

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RIO DE JANEIRO, July 27 — Brazil's military Government, which has long regarded a fast-growing population to be essential to the country's development, has for the first time started promoting an official family-planning program.

The change in policy has been under discussion in senior military circles for several years, but it was only formalized last month when the Health Ministry inaugurated a health program primarily intended to make birth-control methods available to poor women.

With its population growing by 2.4 percent a year and expected to rise from 130 million today to 180 million in the year 2000, Brazil was until now the most populous developing country in the world without a government family-planning program.

'Acts Like a Steamroller'

"This country will never improve itself by growing in this way," Air Brig. Waldyr Vasconcelos, Chief of Staff of the armed forces, said recently. "This mass acts like a steamroller that crushes all development. Only by controlling births can we benefit from the development achieved over the past 20 years."

Population experts here say Brazil's economic crisis and its accompanying problems of unemployment, malnutrition and crime have heightened awareness among officials that, despite the country's vast empty hinterlands, they are unable to handle the social and economic needs of the present population.

The Government also appears to be responding to a growing demand for

family-planning assistance from women. Already about 50 percent of women of child-bearing age are using some form of contraception obtained from private clinics or pharmacies, and a 1980 public-opinion poll showed that more than 75 percent of those questioned favored family planning.

"Most of all, we consider family planning to be a human right, the right of couples to have the children they desire," said Walter Rodrigues, head of the privately run Family Welfare Society and a pioneer in family planning in Brazil. "But accidental reproduction without responsibility creates distortions that start with the family and eventually affect all of society."

Despite the reversal in the Government's traditional policy of encouraging population growth, however, the entire issue remains highly controversial here, with both the Roman Catholic Church and leftist political groups strongly opposed to birth control.

While arguing that contraceptive methods stimulate sexual promiscuity and immorality, church spokesmen have charged that the goal is to cover up "screaming social injustices" through family planning. "It is easier and cheaper to reduce the number of hungry mouths than to achieve a more just distribution of food," Eugenio Cardinal de Araújo Sales of Rio de Janeiro said.

Some See I.M.F.'s Hand

Leftist groups in turn seem convinced that the family-planning program is an imposition of the International Monetary Fund, which has linked emergency credits to execution of a broad austerity program by Brazilian authorities. In a statement last month, the Regional Medical Council of Rio de Janeiro state, which is dominated by leftist doctors, "deplored this monstrous practice" that "we believe involves a slow and cruel genocide."

Some leftist economists have also revived the arguments used by conservative army officers a decade ago that Brazil needs a larger population both to occupy its "surplus" territory and to provide an expanded domestic market able to support continued economic development.

"The great risk we run is not from an increase in the population but from a reduction in the number of young people," according to Mário Victor de Assis Pacheco, an author of books on Brazilian demography. "Soon we will be a nation of old people, like Uruguay."

But today, about 40 percent of Brazil's population — some 52 million people — are under the age of 15 and, of these, 15 million have been classified by sociologists as "abandoned" — that is, unwanted children who have no place in either home or society. Further, 73 of every 1,000 children born nationwide die before their first birthday, and some three million abortions are performed each year, almost equivalent to the number of live births.

Gynecologists Formed Group

It was recognition that the country's principal form of family planning was abortions — which are both illegal and frequently performed by inexperienced practitioners in unhygienic surroundings — that in 1965 prompted a group of Brazilian gynecologists to form the Family Welfare Society, known here as



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A Family Welfare Society adviser speaking to Brazilians attending a family-planning clinic in Rio de Janeiro.

Bemfam, to introduce modern contraceptive techniques.

Often the target of sharp criticism from the press, political groups and the Roman Catholic Church, the welfare society began opening small family-planning clinics in urban slums and eventually in rural districts, with financing coming principally from the London-based International Planned Parenthood Federation.

"We soon realized that our main job was not to provide family planning, even though we are the largest organization to do so, but rather to change attitudes," said Marcio Schiavo, the welfare society's coordinator of information. "The problem wasn't technical but political."

Therefore, although it was expanding its network of clinics and community services, Bemfam gave priority to its meetings with the country's elite. In the peak years of Brazil's economic "miracle" from 1968 to 1973, it had little audience. The Government was building highways through the Amazon Basin with a view to colonizing the region, and senior generals considered a large population as an essential element in Brazil's steady graduation to major power status.

Attitude Changed in '74

A first sign of changing attitudes came when Brazil informed a United Nations population conference in Bucharest, Rumania, in 1974 that the Government would "provide information and means" to enable the poor to plan their families. In 1978 the President, Gen. Ernesto Geisel, warned that Brazil needed "to think a little more about family planning." But in practice, no official program was devised.

Urbanization was bringing a "spontaneous" reduction in annual birth rates from a high of over 3 percent in the 1960's, but a key turning point in the "conversion" of the military came when it was presented with evidence that half the young men presenting themselves for military service were being rejected on health grounds, with many problems attributed to child malnutrition.

"It became easier to argue that the quality of the people was more important than the quantity," Dr. Rodrigues said. "I see no link between territorial occupation and development. The United States doesn't want to occupy Brazil territorially, but it has long done so economically. Our struggle is for economic independence, and that can only be achieved through an educated

and healthy population."

Now, with Brazil in its fourth year of economic recession, the Government's inability to provide food, homes and jobs to the poor majority appears to have provided the sense of urgency needed to confront the population crisis.

Aware of the political hazards involved, the Government is moving cautiously, emphasizing that its new \$15.5 million program involves all aspects of women's health and avoiding setting a target for the country's population growth rate by the year 2000. But experience in Mexico, which abandoned its pro-growth policies with great trepidation in 1974, showed that the availability of family-planning services creates a still greater demand to which the Government must respond.

A recent visit to a crowded Family Welfare Society clinic in a Rio suburb suggested that the demand was already strong here. "I've got two small children and that's enough," said Marlene Sousa, a 24-year-old mother. "It

was my mother-in-law who told me about the clinic. She had seven children, but no one can cope with that many nowadays."