**Mexico City's dirty truth**

**By Central America and Caribbean Correspondent Nick Miles**

Mexico City is infamous for its air pollution.

Government figures suggest that tens of thousands of people die prematurely because of health problems related to the toxic cocktail of smog that envelops the city for much of the winter period from November to May.

The Mexico City government in conjunction with federal authorities has come up with a new ten-year plan to deal with the problem.

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| Mexico city resident holds cloth to his faceSmarting eyes and wheezing are the norm for many of the 25 million residents |

It involves new restrictions on the lead and sulphur content in petrol and multi-million dollar schemes to create new systems of public transport across the city.

It is really only when you get above the city in the mountains to the south that you get a real impression of how bad the smog is.

**Deadly smog**

Some 500 years ago when the conquistadores fist laid their eyes on what was then the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, they saw an island city connected to the mainland by a series of causeways, a majestic site of floating islands for cultivating crops.

Chroniclers at the time called it an "enchanted vision".

Not so now. The lake has disappeared and in its place lies a sprawling conurbation of 25 million people.

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| Mexico City shrouded in smogJust another smoggy day in Mexico City |

From the mountain vantage point, the city is shrouded in what looks like low-lying cloud. Skyscrapers poke out above the dense and deadly smog caused by cold air sinking down into the city trapping pollution beneath it.

"Your eyes smart, your throat stings, you're breathless after just a few steps," local environmental activist Tanya Mijares says as she looks down on the city.

"Successive governments have ignored the problem," she said. "We need action to stop the problem."

**Asthma**

It is in Mexico City's main children's hospital in the centre of town that the urgency for action hits home.

One-year-old Elva is sitting on her mother's lap with her eyes streaming. Doctors are trying to fit a oxygen mask over tiny face. Elva is one of the hundreds of thousands of children who suffer from chronic asthma across the city.

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| One-year-old ElvaOne-year-old Elva suffers from chronic asthma |

"The pollution itself doesn't cause asthma, but the mixture of hundreds of different particles in the air exacerbates the problem," Dr Juan Jose Sienra tells me as he attends to the dozens of children in his care.

"And it's not only the young who suffer, the pollution puts a strain on the heart and increases the risk of all forms of cancer."

It was not until the 1980s that the Mexican Government woke up to the scale of the problem. Throughout the past 20 years, a number of policies have been put in place.

**Corruption**

First there was the closing down of much of the heavily polluting industries in the city - bitumen factories, chemical plants and the like were relocated to sites outside the city.

A system of reducing traffic pollution was also started whereby cars were given a rating on the basis of how environmentally-friendly they are.

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| http://news.bbc.co.uk/furniture/startquote.gif**When will the needs of our children, our pregnant women, our elderly people ever be fully taken into account****http://news.bbc.co.uk/furniture/endquote.gif** |
| **Tanja Mijares, environmentalist** |

The worst offenders are kept off the streets for as much as three days a week.

"That was a good idea in principle," says political commentator Sergio Sarmiento. "But corruption is so rampant in Mexico that it has been easy for people to pay off inspectors. Many of the dirtiest vehicles remain on the streets."

So what will the new 10-year plan mean for the city?

"It's a great step forward," says Arnold Ricalde, head of the environment commission for the state government.

**Recession**

"For the first time, we are looking at ways of increasing the public transport network so that it becomes fully integrated with train systems connecting all of the suburban areas."

But the policy will cost billions of dollars and Mexico is in the grip of an economic recession.

Environmentalist Tanja Mijares is sceptical about whether the money will ever be forthcoming. She takes me to the "periferico" the six-lane road that circles the city. As usual it is clogged with traffic.

"The government has allocated funds to build a whole new level for the traffic here," she tells me.

"That won't solve the problem. In time, that too will become jammed. The billions of dollars it will cost should go into encouraging car-sharing schemes, developing new forms of transport, electric cars, electric trams."

As with pollution problems in so many of the world's cities, the immediate priorities of dealing with congestion - more road building - seem to be at odds with the long-term goals of improving the environment.

But for Ms Mijares that is an approach that the Mexican Government can ill afford to take.

"People are dying here," she says. "When will the needs of our children, our pregnant women, our elderly people ever be fully taken into account?"

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