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A city that waits to die

MEXICO CITY, the largest city in the world, confirms that there are limits to growth. With a crushing population of 20 million, the city struggles to manage its staggering environmental problems.

The most obvious problem is air pollution. As I flew into Mexico City several weeks ago, I was stunned as the plane landed in a brown sea of smog — gunk I was about to breathe.

The seriousness of the air pollution was hammered home when I

If air quality in Mexico City — the world's largest city — continues to decline, it will have to be abandoned in 10 or 15 years.

was told by a European expert in the foreign diplomatic corps that if the air quality continued to decline, Mexico City would have to be abandoned — human habitation shut down — in just 10 to 15 years.

As the air pollution problems make the city less livable, more of the 20 million inhabitants can be expected to move north into the U.S. If the city is shut down, the influx will be dramatic. Such a mass movement of humanity is a very serious issue for the United States.

So where is the U.S. in all of this? The White House is lost in its own smog. Detroit and the oil industry have run the government during the Reagan era and now the Bush era, so our interest is in selling cars and gasoline, and assuring everyone that acid rain and carbon



dioxide aren't really bad enough to take seriously.

Meanwhile, the U.S. is importing all the lead-free gasoline that the Mexicans produce, leaving them with only leaded gas to burn. A recent World Health Organization study found that 7 of 10 newborn babies in Mexico City have excessive levels of lead in their systems.

Can the air quality and health decline be reversed in Mexico City? Possibly. The first step is to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions from

the city's 2.5 million automobiles, which account for up to 80% of the smog.

FORTUNATELY, THE current mayor of Mexico City, Manuel Cariacho Solis, seems to be a courageous leader. Plus, he has incentive. If he succeeds in improving the city's air quality, he will be a safe bet for the presidency of Mexico.

Solis is already moving ahead with immediate and long-term plans. As a start, he has removed

one-fifth, or 500,000, of the registered cars from the road each day. Commuters have to leave their cars parked at home one day a week, and are issued a colored sticker designating that day.

Enforcement is tough. Violators pay heavy fines and their cars are towed. An important element is that the public understands the need to reduce the emissions and is cooperating.

California is one place that has been advising Mexico City. California's air quality standards are the world's most stringent.

Other nations have stepped in, too. West Germany, for instance, has sent in some of its top technicians to duplicate Germany's auto inspection program.

WHAT WILL it take to wake up our White House? Washington leaders should look at a map and realize Mexico is that big land mass on our southern border. We've been blundering around in Nicaragua, arming the contras and pretending the communists are going to march north to Washington. This misses reality.

These actions, along with our ignoring Mexico City's air pollution problems, demonstrate that our federal government still thinks of security only in military terms (While we allocate roughly 40 percent of our budget to the military only three percent is allocated for the environment.

There is hope that the U.S. may yet come of age on global environmental diplomacy with President Bush's decision to raise the EPA to cabinet status.

EPA director William Reilly is an internationalist who has visited Mexico City and understands the environmental and security dilemmas.

May the courageous leader Manuel Cariacho Solis succeed. The world watches as he tackles a problem of global importance.