

Leaders Summit in Guadalajara must tackle the NAFTA link to swine flu

By Rick Arnold and Manuel Pérez Rocha

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Only a few days before the next “three amigos” Summit in Guadalajara, Mexico, and information has only been released drop by drop. There is not any official information yet about its agenda. This contrasts starkly with promises made by Obama during his campaign of greater transparency and involvement of civil society and labor in such summits:

“Unlike similar summits under President Bush, these will be conducted with a level of transparency that represents the close ties among our countries. We will seek the active and open involvement of citizens, labor, the private sector and non-governmental organizations in setting the agenda and making progress.”

A brief statement from the White House reveals that “the North American Leaders’ Summit” will provide an opportunity to engage in “a wide range of issues” including “continued close cooperation to counter the A/H1N1 influenza pandemic.” Indeed, the gravity of the situation deserves it.

However, much more than “continued collaboration” is required from Obama, Harper and Calderon. They should instruct health authorities in their respective countries to investigate the conditions that led to the emergence of the H1N1 flu virus. Evidence uncovered to date suggests that the massive U.S. owned hog raising operations, that were shifted to Mexico from the southern U.S. (to avoid environmental and legal requirements) as soon as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented in 1994, were a potential cause of the outbreak.

Smithfield Foods, the world’s largest pork packer and hog producer, operates the massive hog-raising operations in Perote, Mexico, in the state of Veracruz, where the outbreak originated. The operations, grouped under a Smithfield subsidiary called Granjas Carroll, raise 950,000 hogs per year.

Residents of Perote believe the outbreak has been caused by contamination from pig breeding farms located in the area. They say that the farms, operated by Granjas Carroll, polluted the atmosphere and local water bodies, which in turn led to the disease outbreak. According to one community resident, the organic and fecal waste produced by Granjas Carroll isn’t adequately treated, creating water and air pollution in the region. The company has denied responsibility for the outbreak and even went so far as to initially attribute the ‘ground zero’ cases to “flu.”

North American health experts, who after the last avian flu outbreak helped draft up the scenario for the next flu pandemic under the Security and Prosperity Partnership program, reasoned that the next outbreak would likely come from chickens raised in some small village in South-East Asia. Only two years ago at the Montebello Summit Bush, Harper and Calderon launched the “North American Plan for Avian and Pandemic Influenza”.

Boy did they get it wrong! It wasn't birds but pigs. And instead of a small producer in a developing nation being to 'blame,' it turns out that 'ground zero' was actually in North America, and in all likelihood the product of crowding and other abominable conditions in a massive U.S. owned hog-raising operation -- one that took advantage of the virtual elimination of border constraints under NAFTA to set up operations in a location where regulatory enforcement was lax. This is why the Swine Flu is a.k.a "the NAFTA Flu."

While it is important that our health officials continue to issue directives on precautions to take to avoid catching or spreading this version of the swine flu, it is just as important that government officials from all three countries move immediately to investigate the conditions found in mega-corporate hog farming and poultry farming in all three North American countries -- since this is the most likely source for the next mutant virus pandemic that is killing and making people sick around the world.

Instead of issuing the probable self-congratulatory final declaration citing the three-country collaboration to contain the H1N1 virus, Calderon, Harper and Obama should announce a preventative strike against the risk of future pandemics via an immediate, thorough and public investigation into the deplorable conditions that exist at pig farms such as Granjas Carroll in Perote.

The three leaders should order the drawing up of enforceable management guidelines governing large corporate hog and poultry operations in North America, along with size limitations. Human health must be given priority, and the "competitive advantage" under NAFTA that lower environmental and labour standards in the benefit of unethical corporations must be scrapped.

The swine flu outbreak is yet another example of the hidden social costs of trade agreements such as NAFTA, and it further strengthens the argument for why such 'free-trade' deals need to be renegotiated before the next pandemic emerges to plague people the world over.

The handling of the current outbreak and perpetuation of the economic model that led to it don't bode well for future pandemic preparedness.

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