

A Proud Capital's Distress

Overcrowded, polluted, corrupted, Mexico City offers the world a grim lesson



1984 population
17 million (est.)

A sinister cloud: smog hangs low over Mexico City's cathedral and main square, the Zócalo. Half hidden at right of cathedral is excavated Aztec ruin



When the ragged and exhausted Spanish conquistadors first beheld the lake-encircled capital of the Aztecs one November morning in 1519, they were stunned by its grandeur. A shining metropolis of some 300,000 people, far larger than any city in Europe, Tenochtitlán displayed immense stone temples to the gods of rain and war and an even more

immense royal palace, where Aztec nobles stood guard in jaguar-head helmets and brightly feathered robes. In the nearby marketplace, vendors offered an abundance of jungle fruits and rare herbs and skillfully

were seeing things," Bernal Diaz del Castillo recalled in his memoir of the Spanish invasion, "that had never been heard of or seen before, nor even dreamed about."

A newcomer today is more apt to arrive by air, and before he even glimpses the dried-up bed of Lake Texcoco, now edged with miles of slum hovels, the first thing he sees is an almost perpetual blanket of smog that shrouds the entire city. It is an ugly grayish brown. There is something strangely sinister about it—a cloud of poison. The pilot orders the seat belts tightened and announces an imminent descent into the murk and filth.

This is Mexico City, grand, proud, beautiful Mexico City, which already boasted a Spanish cathedral and a university when Washington and Boston were still woodlands. Within the past year or so this ancient metropolis has grown to about 17 million people, and it is in the process of surpassing Tokyo as the largest city of the world.* But that growth,

which might once have been a point of pride, is a curse. It consists in large part of jobless peasants streaming in from the countryside at a rate of about 1,000 a day. Novelist Carlos Fuentes has called Mexico City the capital of underdevelopment; it has also become a capital of pollution and a capital of slums.

This is the city builder's dream turned nightmare. It is the supercity, the megalopolis, infected by a kind of social cancer that is metastasizing out of control. Its afflictions—a mixture of overcrowding, poverty, pollution and corruption—are a warning to all the other great cities, particularly those in the Third World (*see following story*), but to New York or Los Angeles as well, that what is happening in Mexico City threatens them too.

The statistics of Mexico City's continuing self-destruction are appalling:

► More than 2 million of the city's people have no running water in their homes. Mayor Ramón Aguirre of the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party insists that 95% of the inhabitants have access to water, but for many that means one faucet shared by an entire block.

► More than 3 million residents have no

*According to the U.N., greater Mexico City, which sprawls over about 890 sq. mi., will stand first in 1985 with 18.1 million, followed by the Tokyo-Yokohama complex, 17.2 million; São Paulo, 15.9 million; New York and northeastern New Jersey, 15.3 million.

Population of
Mexico City
(greater metropolitan area)

1950
3.1 million

Source: U.N. Population Division

wrought creations of silver and gold. "The magnificence, the strange and marvelous things of this great city are so remarkable as not to be believed," Hernando Cortés wrote back to the imperial court of Charles V. "We