

Child starvation stalks Argentina's northern provinces

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Since October, Argentina has reported the deaths of scores of children from malnutrition, with thousands more hospitalized and fighting for their lives. Nearly half a million children—more than one in five—are suffering from malnutrition across the country. Included among the deaths reported in recent weeks was a 14-year-old who died February 10, weighing only 25 kilos and a three-year-old weighing only 9.8 kilos—the normal weight for a one-year-old.

The hardest hit areas are in Argentina's northern provinces-rural agricultural zones-such as Tucuman with more than 20 children officially reported dead in barely four months. There are up to 2,000 official malnutrition cases in Simoca, a city just south of Tucuman's capital, and authorities estimate that there are 18,000 throughout the province.

Photographs of emaciated children with limbs weakened by rickets began to circulate last October. There were also widespread reports of children fainting from hunger in schools across the country. Then a series of deaths were reported from malnutrition. Both the media and government initially attributed these deaths to children drinking contaminated water. This caused a public outcry. Since then, weekly reports have emerged of child deaths from starvation in the rural north.

Argentina is the world's sixth-largest exporter of agricultural products, capable of feeding 300 million, 10 times its population. However, in 2001, the economy went into free-fall after the government was forced to float its currency, the Argentine peso, and defaulted on foreign debt payments.

Last year, Argentina entered its worst year of economic decline since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 2002, the economy shrank by more than 11 percent, while the prices of basic goods soared by 75

percent. More than a quarter of the country's workforce is unemployed and more than half a million jobs have been destroyed. At least half the population is living below the poverty line, while a quarter is considered destitute. Even those still working have seen their incomes shrink by 70 percent.

The economic impact has been even more devastating in Argentina's rural northern provinces. In Tucuman, which has 1.1 million inhabitants, 46,000 families live in a "total state of indigence" according to a newspaper report, while 24 percent of children under six suffer from severe malnutrition.

Tucuman is the country's largest producer of sugar cane and lemons. Recent reports revealed that mothers have been forced to feed their babies and infants green tea because they cannot afford food or milk. Roxana de Benedetti, whose five-year-old son Hector died in a shantytown outside Tucuman two months ago, also has a six-month-old who weighs only 2.8 kilos and is currently in hospital. "They told me I needed fortified milk powder, but it costs 10 pesos a box. Thank God they'll give it to her there (in hospital)".

Another rural farm worker from the northern Chaco province, whose 12-year-old daughter died weighing less than nine kilos, said low pay was responsible for her death. "I do rural work and get about 100 pesos (\$US30) per month. Sometimes we eat, sometimes we don't."

The Argentine media sought to explain away the starvation crisis as the result of corrupt northern province officials siphoning off large quantities of aid. The public outcry prompted five non-governmental organisations to file lawsuits against Tucuman's governor Julio Miranda for "willful neglect" of the children who have died of malnutrition in the province.

The response of the federal government of President

Eduardo Duhalde has been to shift the blame onto local government mismanagement and corruption. After a public outcry over the images that appeared in the media last year of children dying of malnutrition, Duhalde sent his wife to the region. Hilda Duhalde, who is responsible for social programs in Argentina, stated after her visit to Tucuman that the local government has mismanaged its social emergency programs. Wiping the government's hands of the situation, she stated, "We are not Biafra".

One official, however, offered a withering self-indictment. The death of children from hunger, said production minister Anibal Fernandez, is the product of "a sick society and a ruling class that are sons of bitches, all of them, myself included. If not, this would not be happening."

In fact the only real emergency response to the starvation crisis came from the most destitute sections of Argentine society. A donation of more than a tonne of food, clothing and toys for children's soup kitchens in Tucuman was organised and sent by a group of street cardboard sellers from the capital Buenos Aires. It took them a month to raise the provisions from the city.

It was recently reported that more than a million people have emigrated from Argentina since the start of 2002 in a mass attempt to escape deepening crisis and poverty. This situation will worsen as the Duhalde government has pledged to intensify social austerity measures as part of a deal reached last month with the International Monetary Fund to roll over part of its \$6 billion debt to the lending agency.

In some financial circles, the message is clear—there should be no more time or money loaned to Argentina. According to a *Financial Times* article on January 13, "If it (the IMF) does lend... it will be committing a big mistake." It continued: "Instead of negotiating assistance in exchange for promises, the IMF should withdraw from Argentine domestic policy... Political reform would come faster, if it comes at all, once Argentines know they cannot expect any assistance until reforms are implemented, not just promised. These reforms should... establish a political system that is... transparent, open, honest and capable of solving economic and social problems." In other words, the IMF is too lenient and does not go far enough in demanding attacks on social conditions.

The Duhalde government has scheduled elections for

April, and the general consensus is that none of the candidates merit support. Most predictions are that two rounds will be needed to elect a government, as no candidate is polling more than 16 percent. The complete lack of an alternative in the present social collapse means that any incoming government will surely meet with unprecedented social upheavals.



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