

Six children die from hunger and tainted water in Argentina's Salta Province

By Rafael Azul
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News of the death of six extremely malnourished children in the province of Salta, in northwestern Argentina, has exposed a crisis of hunger of immense proportions in this South American nation, an important exporter of food to the rest of the world. A seventh victim was an adult woman, who died giving birth.

All six children died in January. Thirty-seven other starving children are now hospitalized in Tartagal Hospital, some 300 kilometers (180 miles) away from the region. The children belong to the indigenous Wichi tribe, which is concentrated near the Bolivian border. The Peronist government has declared a health emergency in response to the deaths.

The sixth victim was 21 months old. He died on January 26 while being transported from one health clinic to another. Diagnosed with “chronic malnutrition,” he had suffered 10 days of vomiting and diarrhea, was feverish and severely dehydrated. The first three children who died, all below the age of three, shared the same symptoms.

While the Salta government declared a health emergency in response to these deaths, starvation is not new to this region, which borders Bolivia and Paraguay. Neither are the empty yearly declarations of health emergencies. No preventive measures have been taken by government authorities, provincial or federal, under growing conditions of near famine. Because of the savage austerity measures that are in place—Argentina is mired in a crisis of debt and economic depression—there are diminishing resources made available to prevent these very predictable deaths.

Given the distance to Tartagal Hospital, and conditions in the area, in the past health workers were assigned to visit villagers, going from home to home on bicycles, resolving health issues, providing vaccinations and measuring heights and weights. That is no longer the case.

Compounding the conditions of hunger, there is a shortage of drinking water. Much of the water in the region is contaminated with toxic chemicals from agribusiness and oil production.

Spokespersons for the indigenous tribes that inhabit this region in the northwest corner of the country blame the “extreme poverty” of the region on the same “political process” that is affecting the rest of the country, as well as the privatization of the national oil company YPF in 1992 (and its increasing exploitation with no regard to its environmental impact).

Deforestation has also benefited agricultural monopolies, including soybeans and cattle, in complete disregard for tribal property rights. Tribal access to their traditional homelands and rivers has been restricted over the years, preventing the Wichi population from engaging in hunting, agriculture and food gathering.

Hospitals and clinics lack sufficient ambulances, equipment and medications to address this crisis. In addition, the government's austerity policies have resulted in the layoff of travelling personnel, capable of raising the alarm and of attending immediate health needs in the towns and villages of the region.

Tribal leaders recently contacted Doctors Without Borders, asking for a humanitarian mission of health professionals. Their request was seconded by a group of Argentine doctors, lawyers and anthropologists, one of whom, Rodolfo Franco, is the only doctor in the region. Franco pointed out that no one should ever die of hunger in Salta, a province which is a net exporter of food. Argentina has become one of the world's main exporters of soybeans and soybean products, generating super profits for the agricultural and financial oligarchies.

The newly elected administration of President Alberto Fernandez (Peronist) launched a food aid program that consists of a debit card to be used for purchasing food; a monthly voucher of between 4,000 and 6,000 pesos per

household (approximately 66 to 100 US dollars). The Fernandez administration plans to distribute 1.4 million debit cards in March, expediting their distribution in Salta and other regions on the verge of famine.

As he announced the issuance of food cards last week, Daniel Arroyo, the social development minister, described the program as a stop-gap measure. He then, absurdly and cynically, advised Argentines to take steps to resolve the crisis by “working” to raise their own food, through planting gardens and raising their own chickens.

Reacting to the news of the sixth death, Arroyo, who had been in Salta in the middle of January, responded on Twitter that “social and health conditions in northern Salta are now very critical,” urging the distribution of bottled water and food.

The death of the six children may prove the tip of the iceberg in what could quickly develop into an epidemic of illness and death.

Last week, when reporters from Salta’s *El Tribuno* toured the region, accompanying an army nurse, they witnessed that nearly every household has at least one child “sick with diarrhea, with a fever in many cases,” In addition to the fevers and diarrhea, the reporters witnessed signs of fungal and bacterial infections, including tuberculosis.

The reporters indicated that there are still very few signs of any emergency health measures in place. They also noticed signs of malnutrition among adults.

Reporters also indicated that vaccinations seem to have stopped in 2017. “There is a cohort of 5-, 6- and 7-year-old children who have yet to weighed, let alone vaccinated,” said a reporter.

What the article describes, in addition to malnutrition and lack of drinking water, is the collapse of healthcare in the region.

Conditions in other parts of Argentina mirror those in Salta Province and other regions on the northern frontier with Bolivia and Paraguay. Nationally, nearly 40 percent of Argentina’s households live in poverty. Children are disproportionately affected; one half of youth below the age of 17 are poverty-stricken. Many of them face serious health consequences.

A study released by Argentina’s Catholic University (UCA) in December paints a truly alarming picture of hunger in Argentina, a nation with the capacity of feeding 400 million people across the world. The study concentrates on youth ages 17 and under.

The UCA report finds that 30.1 percent of youth live in households that have reduced food consumption, in

quantity and quality, compared to the previous year. Fourteen percent of youth experience severe “food insecurity,” going hungry throughout the year, an increase from 2017 to 2018 despite an increase in 2019 of government assistance for the hungry. These programs, such as school lunches and food vouchers, now cover 42.2 percent of the country’s youth.

However, the UCA report indicates that the distribution of food assistance is very uneven. Over 42 percent of those with “severe food insecurity,” such as the victims of the Salta famine, received nothing in 2019.

While the highest level of food insecurity, 52 percent (28 percent with “severe food insecurity”), involves youth that grow up in households of contingent and temporary workers, food insecurity for more stable workers exceeds 27 percent (11.5 percent with “severe food insecurity”).

Public anger is building in Salta. On January 28, residents of the city of Los Blancos in northern Salta occupied the health clinic there. According to the demonstrators, the clinic has run out of essential medications; it lacks an ambulance to transport sicker patients to regional centers, and there is a lack of trained personnel. In addition, water is no longer piped into the center. Water must be brought in from a nearby well. Residents also demanded fans and air conditioning equipment. Temperatures in El Blanco often rise above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

The suffering and deaths in January of these seven children—their names have not been made public—are an indictment of a crumbling capitalist order that is unable to provide for the most basic human needs—food, health and education—for millions of people around the world, while a tiny minority wallows in inconceivable wealth.

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