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## **Children's Day Spotlights Negative Socioeconomic Data for Paraguay**

*by LADB Staff*

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The celebration of the usually irrelevant Children's Day in Paraguay took on new significance this year, when President Fernando Lugo received a delegation of children from around the country, invited them to express their opinions, and was then subjected to a real grilling. The dialogue opened a debate that put the critical socioeconomic reality of the country on the front pages, and the press, which overwhelmingly opposes Lugo, and political leaders, who reject almost mechanically everything coming from the administration, seized the opportunity to harass the president.

"I think we are doing something, but it is still not enough. The ideal would be that children not work, that they study and play, and I believe that together we can accomplish that and eradicate this evil that has spread like an illness in our society," Lugo told the children gathered at the Casa de Gobierno.

When the president said "together," he pointed out that he was referring to his administration, society, families, municipalities, churches, the media, and social organizations. "You are right, now we have doctors to take care of us, but we need to build more schools, new houses, and to give the poor good food. Our parents need to have work so that children don't have to go into the street to raise the money that their parents can't earn," said Milciades Villalba, a 12-year-old boy who participates in the assistance programs for working children of the Coordinadora Nacional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores (CONNATS).

"Lugo isn't keeping his promises, the children go hungry, they don't have medical attention, they are recruited by adults who exploit them sexually and at work, and they take refuge in drugs," wrote the daily newspaper ABC Color.

Vice President Federico Franco, at odds with Lugo since shortly after the administration took office in August 2008 (see NotiSur, 2009-02-21 and 2009-05-01), took the opportunity to complain and criticize the president because he feels sidelined from official activities. "He has marginalized me, that needs to be corrected," said Franco, when asked for comment by the Italian news agency ANSA.

None of the critics mentioned that, at the meeting with the president, the child workers had also identified the police as "the ones who persecute and punish" street children the most. Nor did they mention the large soy producers as the major source of environmental destruction and illnesses caused by the abusive and indiscriminant use of toxic agrochemicals.

Meanwhile, last week the opposition, with the support of the media, was close to having the number of legislators needed to begin impeachment proceedings against Lugo. The objective is to remove

him from office, which some analysts call a "civilized coup." History of Children's Day Children's Day honors the 3,500 children who were massacred on Aug. 16, 1869, when they confronted an army of 20,000 soldiers sent by the governments of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in what history calls the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870).

For historians, the event was an invasion favored and financed by Great Britain, the dominant economic power at the time. Paraguay was decimated in the fighting and suffered a genocide in which it lost 90% of its male population over 15 years of age.

The final defensive operations were led by children, like the 3,500 who died in the battle at Acosta Nu, 75 km north of the capital, Asuncion. Scholars of the three alliance countries agree that, from the perspective of British interests, Paraguay was a "bad example." At that time, Paraguayan tobacco, textiles, and cotton were preferred by European consumers.

Favored by government protectionist policies, the country was a reference point for the New World. It had developed the first railway system in the region, had telegraph service, and had the only functioning iron foundry in South America. The first ship built in Latin America came from an Asuncion shipyard. The country had no unemployment problem, and primary education was compulsory and free. The three invading countries and Paraguay today comprise the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR).

Paraguay has gone from its high level of advancement in the 19th century to having the region's worst socioeconomic indicators today. Paraguay relies on UNICEF for data "It is always better to listen to our people, to learn from their wisdom, than to listen to people from international organizations telling us what we have to do and how we have to do it. We find the truth paying more attention to the vulnerable," said Abel Irala, an educator for the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Calle-Escuela in Asuncion.

### *UNICEF study cites dire statistics*

But regardless of Irala's sarcasm, the country does not produce its own statistics and must turn for data on children to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), which states, in its report Cooperation Program 2007-2011 General Situation in Paraguay, the following:

\*Paraguay has the second-most-unequal income distribution in Latin America. Forty-eight percent of its 6.9 million people are children and adolescents under 18 years of age, 50% of whom are poor.

\*According to 2004 data, more than 320,000 children between 5 and 17 years of age work, almost 18% of that age group. Of those, 8% work in the streets and the vast majority of the remaining 92% work in rural activities. The UNICEF study points to a form of work called "criadazgo," which has characteristics of indentured servitude or slavery. It consists of domestic work done in exchange for room, board, and education. "The children are given by poor families, generally from rural areas, to urban families under the assumption that they will have a better future," said UNICEF. Minister of Children's Issues Liz Torres said that the visibility of street children "should not let us forget that there are less visible forms of exploitation, like that of children who work in unhealthy jobs in the rock and lime quarries or in ovens where they make charcoal and bricks."

\*The infant-mortality rate varies by region, ranging from 21 to 34 per 1,000 live births. Among the principal causes are problems during birth delivery and infections among newborns, acute respiratory infections, and diarrhea. The UNICEF report State of the World's Children 2009 says that every month 10 women die of causes related to pregnancy or childbirth.

\*In the last decade, mortality among those less than one year old as well as among those less than a month old has remained stable. According to official figures, nine children under five years of age die every day (3,300 each year). Birth defects, infections in newborns, and premature births account for 43% of the deaths.

\*In children under five, underweight is 7.3 times more common among poor children. Chronic malnutrition, that which accumulates over time and is identified by physical or intellectual underdevelopment, affects 13.7% of children under five, increasing to 41% among indigenous children.

\*In 2008, the level of primary-school attendance was 89%, but the methodology and pedagogy within the educational system were not close to meeting the needs of bilingual children. (Guarani is the first language in 59% of households.) Despite that overwhelming reality, the language these children inherit from their parents and grandparents has been disdained by the dominant class. Guarani was declared the nation's second official language, along with Spanish, in 1992, three years after the end of the last military dictatorship, headed by Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). This delay in recognizing Guarani as an official language could explain the lack of teachers trained to teach in the indigenous language.

\*Neither the state nor UNICEF have numerical data regarding sexual exploitation of children but both agree that it has reached "extraordinary" levels, especially in the eastern part of the country, known as the Tri-Border area, which encompasses Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Puerto Iguazu (Argentina), and Foz do Iguacu (Brazil). The lack of interest by all three governments in the situation of children has meant that, in 2007, 22.3% of those under 18 years of age were not in the Registro Civil. "A boy or girl who is not documented," said UNICEF, "does not exist in the eyes of the law and therefore cannot exercise their rights." Despite that reality and the criticisms, some things seem to be changing.

On Sept. 13, a notable increase was announced in the budget for the Secretaria de la Ninez from 2008 to 2009. It went from US\$1 million to US\$7.4 million, and another US\$2.5 million will go to finance programs carried out by 53 social organizations. "We are still far from the ideal, but the signs are good that things are changing. If we add to these resources actions carried out by other ministries that look at the situation of children and adolescents with a focus on rights, we are going in the right direction," said Minister Torres.

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