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TB Outbreak in Argentine Sweatshops

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Tuberculosis, a disease linked with poverty that had been under control in Argentina since the early part of the last century, has reappeared with a vengeance in the country’s capital. As before, the outbreak appeared in clandestine sweatshops that make high-fashion, expensive clothing. Paradoxically, the city that is a South American cultural Mecca with the highest rates of human development also has the country’s highest pollution levels.

A judicial investigation following a fire that broke out in an illegal sweatshop and killed six garment workers in 2006 revealed that dramatic reality (NotiSur, April 28, 2006). After reading files from the state Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and the four main public hospitals where infectious diseases are treated, Prosecutor Federico Delgado criticized Buenos Aires, pointing out that its tuberculosis (TB) index increased 25% (from 26.5 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 1985 to 33 cases in 2011), while the national TB index dropped by 39% for the same 26-year period.

Delgado’s report—which the daily Página 12 called essentially a sociological essay, something not common in judicial rulings"—said the rise in cases in the capital is related to "overcrowded conditions and the extreme economic vulnerability of exploited laborers, many of whom are migrants from countries with high rates of tuberculosis such as Bolivia (NotiSur, April 14, 1995)."

Tuberculosis is an infectious disease produced by the Koch bacillus, or mycobacterium tuberculosis, that affects the lungs, although it also can reside in any of the body’s organs. The judicial report said, "It is an airborne disease spread via wet particles dispersed by coughing or sneezing."

The prosecutor said that TB is easily diagnosed and, in Argentina, can be treated and cured at no cost to patients. "But," he said, "we are far from eradicating it, and, on the contrary, it is growing in direct relationship to social deprivation. ..., Evidence links poverty to overcrowding, homelessness, and job insecurity. Those conditions have given rise to this phenomenon now emerging in the country’s capital."

Delgado also said, "The outbreak of tuberculosis is a symptom of capitalist exploitation."

Mayor’s wife, brother-in-law implicated

Until 1996, Argentina’s president appointed the head of the capital city’s government, which meant that for more than a century Buenos Aires’ citizenry did not have direct representation. Except for brief periods of democracy, the country lived under extreme right-wing civilian-military dictatorships between 1930 and 1983. Since 1996, after the new Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (CABA) gained autonomy, the capital has been governed by a popularly elected mayor. A mostly conservative citizenship has elected rightist leaders to govern the city of nearly 3 million people. In the two most recent administrative periods since 2007, the top post in the city has gone to Mauricio Macri, leader of Propuesta Republicana (PRO), a party with a neoliberal orientation.

Macri’s wife, Juliana Awada, and her brother Daniel allegedly own the largest children’s clothing manufacturing business (Cheeky) and have been accused of operating clandestine sweatshops.
Feb. 24, Macri’s brother-in-law Daniel was charged, along with five other textile entrepreneurs, with forcing hundreds of undocumented Bolivian clothing workers into servitude.

The investigation, opened after the March 2006 fire, plus a succession of complaints from La Alameda, an organization that fights all forms of trafficking, files from public hospitals, and the UBA’s own investigation revealed that "the conditions of exploitation in illegal sweatshops create a fertile environment for the spread of tuberculosis." The prosecutor’s report also said that many persons brought into the country illegally had been already exposed to TB and developed the disease in the poorly ventilated, overcrowded sweatshops because they lacked proper nutrition and got little rest. New infections occurred under these conditions.

Health problems worsen under slave-labor conditions because there are obstacles to getting medical attention and adequate treatment. Sick workers, fearing they will lose their job if employers know they have TB, do not seek medical attention or follow through even when they do. Based on information from one of the public hospitals, TB cases showed up in 13 schools attended by children of clothing-factory workers. Delgado’s report also noted that many workers live where they work in extremely precarious conditions.

Aldo Paligari, a specialist who heads a health center in the Flores neighborhood where most of Buenos Aires’ illegal sweatshops are, told the prosecutor that, since TB carries a strong social stigma and infected persons are often ashamed and try to hide their illness, the disease is well-advanced by the time most of them seek help. Furthermore, cures require up to 15 doses of medicine per day for at least nine months, making proper follow-up difficult.

The numbers speak with greater eloquence. The social-service area of the Hospital Muñiz, a hospital specializing in treatment of patients with HIV, a disease associated with TB, reported that only 29% of 544 persons found to have the disease completed treatment. Of those patients, 60% were born in Argentina; 40% were migrants from neighboring countries. Some 41% of them, hired under semi-slavery conditions, lived in precarious work conditions in the clandestine sweatshops. The hospital reported that, when patients don’t stick with treatment, they often return later in worse condition.

Infections among undocumented immigrants

The UBA’s Instituto de Tisioneumonologia, a reference center for the diagnosis and treatment of TB, registered about 30% of TB cases occurring in the capital. Specialists there observed an increase of cases related to undocumented immigrants working in illegal garment workshops beginning in 2002, with most of the migrants coming from Bolivia and the second-largest number coming from Peru.

"They are easy prey for sweatshop owners who reduce them to conditions of slavery," the UBA report said. A shocking finding in the report says that "more than half the patients sleep in the same place they work, and most of them find it difficult to leave—or are prohibited from leaving—during the day, which creates a huge obstacle to getting medical treatment. Some 50% of the patients work more than 80 hours per week. In the case of male workers, many work an additional 12 hours. None have any type of social or health insurance. In 81.8% of the cases, patients were exposed to TB at work and 72.4% of the patients showed signs of hunger because of insufficient diets since they lacked the money to buy enough food even though they worked long hours each day."

Some officials in the CABA government dared to denounce Macri, accusing him of allowing labor trafficking to protect his family. A case in point is Edgardo Castro, a high-ranking official in the city’s
Subsecretaría de Trabajo. He said the government conducts thousands of inspections of clandestine garment workshops but shuts down only a handful of places despite proof of serious irregularities. In testimony before Delgado, Castro criticized the Macri administration’s policy of not taking action against any owner, because, he said, that would affect the mayor’s wife and his brother-in-law. "What the CABA government is doing is criminal," Castro said. "When a worker complaint is registered, the first thing it does is warn the company. The worker is then fired and irregularities corrected before the inspection."

Inspection and sanction statistics reflect Castro’s description of what happens. In 2012 complaints resulted in 7,224 garment-workshop inspections, but only 26 of those workshops were penalized. In 2013 there were 5,498 inspections and only 20 (or 0.36%) were shut down. In January 2014, there were 473 inspections, but no sanctions whatsoever levied.

Days after the tragic fire of 2006, La Alameda and the Defensoría de Pueblo denounced slave-labor practices by companies, including those owned by Macri’s relatives. At that time, federal Judge Guillermo Montenegro absolved Juliana and Daniel Awada, the principal defendants. Months later, on Dec. 10, 2007, with Macri at the helm of the CABA government, Montenegro was sworn in as the city’s security minister.

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