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Argentina’s Yerba Mate Plantations Accused of Using Child Labor

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A recent news report on working and living conditions on yerba mate plantations in northeastern Argentina and a bill introduced before PARLASUR, the legislative body of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), have turned new attention to labor law violations in Argentina and to the persistence of child labor in almost slave-like conditions, especially in rural areas.

The exposé, published July 12 by BBC Mundo, the British network’s Spanish language branch, seems to be resonating with the public in a way that past evidence of labor irregularities did not, perhaps because it centers around mate, Argentina’s national beverage. Mate is prepared by adding hot water (at no more than 80 degrees Celsius or 176 Fahrenheit) to the dried leaves and stems of yerba mate, a shrub in the holly family. The state-run Instituto Nacional de la Yerba Mate (National Institute of Yerba Mate, INYM) estimates that on average, Argentines consume 6.7 kilograms of yerba mate (which translates into 100 liters of mate) annually.

The BBC report focuses specifically on the northeastern province of Misiones, which produces 90% of the country’s yerba mate and exports to 47 countries, including places like Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The story is accompanied by a series of photographs showing children harvesting yerba mate leaves and sleeping in small caves dug into the earth. The report also contains testimony from adults explaining how children as young as 5 are taken out of school to work the plantations. Interestingly, La Nación—a leading Argentine daily that has a standing agreement to republish BBC material—chose not to in this case.

The work in question is carried out between April and September, during the most inclement period of the year, involves 12-hour days, and pays barely enough for the child laborers to contribute to their families’ food budgets. La tarefa (a Brazilian Portuguese term meaning “harvest” in this case) is carried out manually and involves a process known as quebranza (another Brazilian Portuguese word), whereby the child workers yank off the sharp-edged leaves of the shrub, often bloodying their hands in the process.

“Countries need to make more of an effort to eradicate child labor, especially when it comes to breaking certain cultural barriers,” said Gustavo Ponce, an expert with the International Labor Organization (ILO). “It’s no coincidence that agriculture is the sector that most exposes minors to work. It’s the most informal [sector] in the economy and involves piecework and under-the-table payments, conditions that impact families, creating a situation where child labor doesn’t seem out of the ordinary.”

Powerful players
People have long known about the human exploitation occurring on yerba mate plantations in Misiones. But the situation didn’t attract attention from the academic world until 2012, when the Universidad Nacional de Misiones produced its first provincial study on yerba mate pickers. The
study spoke directly about “slave labor, subhuman housing, and a lack of basic services like potable water that the tareferos [pickers], both children and adults, must endure on a regular basis.”

The Buenos Aires newspaper Página 12 suggests that the situation has gone largely overlooked because of the involvement of powerful people, including Ramón Puerta, a former provisional governor and Senate leader who currently serves as Argentina’s ambassador to Spain. Puerta was also one of the five ephemeral presidents that briefly led the country, one after the other, between Dec. 21, 2001, and Jan. 2, 2002, when Argentina suffered its worst institutional crisis (NotiSur, Jan. 11, 2002). Like the current Argentine president, Mauricio Macri, Puerta studied civil engineering at the Universidad Católica Argentina. Most of his work, however, involves rural activities. Puerta is the country’s leading yerba mate producer, and also has business interests in large-scale tobacco and soy cultivation, forestry extraction, and livestock.

A labor inspection carried out in 2013 on a plantation called I Porá (meaning “very pretty” in Guaraní) found 40 workers in conditions characterized at the time as subhuman. Puerta admitted that I Porá belongs to a family business group involving himself, his parents, and his sister. He denied, however, that the 40 laborers worked for one of his companies. Two years later, in May 2015, the Procuraduría de Trata y Explotación de Personas (Office of the Ombudsman for Trafficking and Exploitation of People, PROTEX) named Puerta in a case involving the exploitation of children. Again, the judiciary failed to pursue the matter. More recently, in June, Puerta was accused of “labor-related trafficking and exploitation of minors for having reduced 61 workers, six of them children, to servitude.” In this new case, the workers in question are described as “being subjected to long workdays in conditions of extreme deficiency with regards to health, safety, and hygiene.

Fifteen years ago, when Puerta was designated president of the Senate, the country’s leading dailies ran profile pieces on the politician and business magnate. Clarín published an article on Nov. 20, 2001, under a headline that used a pun on his native state of Misiones: “Missionary, Millionaire, and Reputed Playboy.” The next month, on Dec. 10, La Nación ran its own article, this one titled “A Millionaire Romantic Who Cultivates Yerba Mate and Good Relations.”

**Demanding joint action**

The issue of child labor has also attracted attention from PARLASUR, based in the Uruguayan capital Montevideo, where on May 31 its legislators presented the basic framework of a joint protocol to eradicate child labor in MERCOSUR member countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela).

The ILO, according to its most recent study, conducted in 2013, estimates that there are more than 14 million underage victims of labor exploitation in the region (NotiSur, Aug. 2, 2013, and April 1, 2016). The PARLASUR bill, which was presented in Argentina in June and in Paraguay and Brazil the following month, looks to improve labor conditions for entire family units, promote preventative health measures, and incorporate the rights of children in school curriculums. The text has not been presented in Venezuela due a boycott of the government in Caracas by Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil.

“What we sought, as parents, is to make sure that our children and the children of millions of families living in the MERCOSUR countries have decent education and healthcare, that the children practice sports, that they play and study, not work,” said Jorge Taiana, a former foreign affairs minister in Argentina who currently serves as the PARLASUR president.
During the First Forum on the Eradication of Child Labor, as the presentations were called, PARLASUR representatives said that “the inclusive policies of [the region’s] progressive governments brought [child labor] down sharply, by four percentage points, between 2004 and 2012.” They also underscored the need for a unified effort—advancing legislation, establishing oversight measures, teaching people about their rights—to tackle the problem.

“On a global level, we’re far from having the alarming numbers seen in Asia and Africa,” Taiana said. “And we’ve made a lot of progress, particularly between 2006 and 2012, amid a global financial crisis, which just goes to show the importance of having a government that protects and includes. But we still have many children who work, and PARLASUR’s job is to pressure governments to eradicate this crime.” The years to which the PARLASUR president referred correspond to the Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff governments in Brazil, the Tabaré Vázquez and José Mujica governments in Uruguay, and the Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner governments in Argentina.

“It is increasingly clear that we can’t put an end to this drama without a government that is present, that regulates and holds people accountable,” Taiana went on to say. “That is why we’re concerned with the paradigm shift taking place in the region, with conservative governments in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay that see private activity as the best way to regulate society.”

In Argentina, in the meantime, a non-governmental organization called Un Sueño para Misiones (A Dream for Misiones) has contributed to the debate by launching a national campaign under the slogan “Me gusta el mate sin trabajo infantil” (I like my mate without child labor). The campaign resulted in a bill that is being examined by Congress. So far, however, the proposal has attracted more criticism than support.

The idea is to offer incentives—along with a “child-labor free” label—to companies that don’t employ children on their plantations. But the plan would also mean a US$0.10 per kilo price increase for yerba mate consumers. The extra money would be shared in equal parts, according to the NGO, by the workers and producers. For the latter, that not only means an additional source of income; it also means getting credit for improved worker salaries without having to entirely pay for it.

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