

Illegal-drug use soars in Argentina, thanks to IMF austerity

by Cynthia Rush

Most readers of *EIR* are aware of Argentina's status as the Ibero-American debtor which has for 10 years obediently followed the dictates of the International Monetary Fund, both under the 1976-83 military dictatorship and then under the "democratic" regime of President Raúl Alfonsín.

What is emerging now is a shocking picture of how this deliberate policy of economic looting, especially under the IMF's much-lauded *Austral* plan, has opened this once-productive nation to the drug mafias, and subjected its increasingly impoverished population to the degradation of drug consumption and the "culture" accompanying it.

Five or six years ago, most Argentines would report that their country was only "a country of transit" through which marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs would pass to reach their final destinations in the United States or Europe. "We're lucky, we don't really have a drug problem here," they would say.

Today, Argentina is no longer a transit zone, but a country with a growing drug consumption problem, where a nascent cocaine-processing industry is developing, and where an alarming degree of crime in major urban areas is drug related.

This growth of the drug trade and its "culture," is an assault on the sense of cultural and technological optimism which has historically characterized Argentina's population.

Since December 1983, when Alfonsín came into office, citizens have witnessed the extraordinary growth of Argentina's pornography industry, the highlight of which was the introduction of the Argentine edition of *Playboy* magazine. All this occurred under the rubric of "freedom of the press," flourishing under the new democratic regime.

Now, Argentinians are watching with horror as their children fall prey to the drug trade. A growing number of drug victims are youngsters—teenagers from "marginalized," poorer sectors of the population, or abandoned street children, some as young as 9 or 10, seen sniffing glue or smoking marijuana in Buenos Aires subway stations, when they are not out begging for food or money.

These statistics never find their way into the IMF board meetings, where members demand that Argentina impose *more* austerity, to qualify for new loans.

According to Officer Guillermo Mendizábal of the Buenos Aires Federal Police, reported in a May 1986 edition of *La Semana* magazine, 600 kilos of cocaine now pass through Argentina every year, of which 120 are consumed domestically by 20,000 hard-core addicts. Another 250,000 people can be categorized as "sporadic" consumers.

Ten tons of marijuana from Brazil and Paraguay enter Argentina annually, half of which is consumed domestically. Refined cocaine enters from Bolivia and is transported through the Andes to the cities of Mendoza or Bariloche. From the country's north, it is then distributed to such major cities as Córdoba, Rosario, and Buenos Aires. Marijuana produced domestically can't compete with Brazilian or Paraguayan imports. Even so, a police map of the capital and province of Buenos Aires shows 50% of the total area, covered with small marijuana plantations.

Federal Police note that Argentina exports to neighboring

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countries all the chemicals used in the refining of cocaine: ether, chlorhydric acid, potassium permanganate, sodium chloride, and alcohol. But federal judge Alberto Piotti, of San Isidro, reports that the country is also developing its own cocaine-processing industry. This began to emerge after 1983 as anti-drug efforts in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil made mafia activities more difficult in these countries.

Piotti told *Somos* magazine that he had two cases in his court related to cocaine processing, and that "of 972 cases in

my court, 500 are drug related.”

A drop in the price of cocaine—a gram now costs between 25 and 30 australes (\$35 to \$40)—has led to increased consumption nationwide. Dr. Carlos Cagliotti, founder and director of Cenariosco (National Center for Social Rehabilitation), reports that his center now receives 100 new cases a month for drug rehabilitation. Between 1980 and 1984, the center received 36 new cases monthly. In 1985, the figure jumped to 85, and today approaches 100.

Future of a nation

Argentina’s economic crisis didn’t begin under Raúl Alfonsín. But the existence of the drug trade, and its impact on the nation’s culture and social fabric, has become most visible only within the last year. During that same period, the Austral plan was gutting workers’ wages by 40%, causing a drop in living standards, and cutting off credit and investment, which has put tens of thousands out of productive employment.

The social and moral disintegration accompanying this economic collapse can be gleaned from the pages of Buenos Aires’ major newspapers. They include almost daily accounts of violence, crime, and deaths related to drug consumption or trafficking—many of them involving children. *Somos* magazine reports that the average age of most addicts is now 16, down from 25 a few years ago.

In early June, the death from a drug overdose of 12-year-old Marcelo Cerruolo, shocked the inhabitants of Buenos Aires. The son of a poor, working-class family, Marcelo and his classmates had for some time been regularly consuming marijuana and inhaling glue or other substances provided by an adult who came by the school.

The case of Marcelo Cerruolo is not an isolated one. A study done recently of one poor section of Buenos Aires found, that of 48,000 intoxicated children and adolescents, (representing 70% of the youth population of the Ciudadela Norte area), 65% consumed alcohol and inhalants, 25% smoked marijuana, and the 10% remaining consumed psychopharmacological drugs.

The “drugs of poverty” consumed by these children are glue and other combustible substances, which can be purchased at the local drugstore or bookstore, or the corner newspaper stand. In Buenos Aires, a significant degree of street crime—assaults on pedestrians, shops, and cars—is committed by the “poxi gangs”: bands of poor youth who daily inhale these substances.

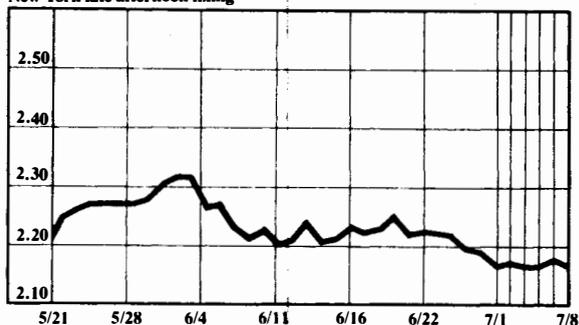
Dr. Cagliotti has documented the devastating effect which glue inhalation has on the body’s vital organs, producing severe respiratory ailments, weight loss, intestinal hemorrhaging, change in blood pressure, and psychosis, among other things. Death from overdose of glue is not uncommon.

In recent international conferences, authorities have pointed out that Argentina is quickly entering the category of countries like Colombia or Mexico, where 10 children per day die from glue inhalation.

Currency Rates

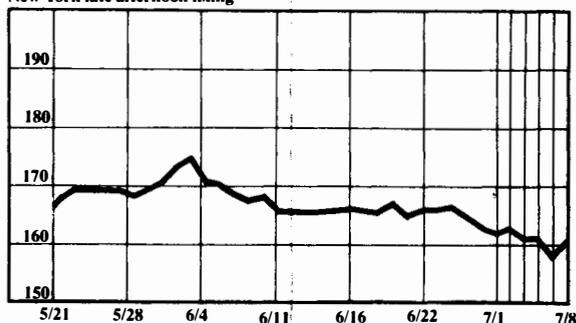
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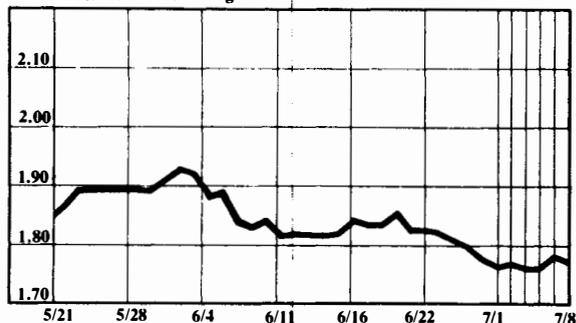
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing

