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FEATURE: Poor man's cocaine ravages Argentine slums

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DPA POLITICS World Society Cocaine Argentina FEATURE: Poor man's cocaine ravages Argentine slums

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Buenos Aires (dpa) - The living dead: in Argentina's slums, the phrase has come to describe skinny addicts, often in rags and even barefoot, as they roam aimlessly through the dirt streets in search of a short-lived fix.

Drug abuse has come to mark life in the slums of Buenos Aires, where emaciated bodies, lung disease, premature births, AIDS and broken homes are often the result.

Paco, the drug of choice, is the poor man's cocaine and provides a brief, if dangerous, escape from misery. Made from cocaine paste left over from the manufacture of pure cocaine and processed with benzene, sulphuric acid, and sometimes even ground glass, paco has its equivalent of "bazuco" in Colombia, "kete" in Peru and "pedra" in Brazil.

Maxi, 28, was only 18 when he started abusing. First it was alcohol, then marijuana and later paco. Now, he is struggling to go straight, attending counselling sessions at the San Alberto Hurtado centre on Villa 21, a slum in the southern Buenos Aires neighbourhood of Barracas. He can't quite pinpoint how he entered the downward spiral, and refers to a mixture of relationship troubles and lack of opportunities.

"Yesterday I did not take anything," said Maxi recently. But in general, he is not doing so well. A few days earlier, he had cut his wrists during a drinking binge.

There are signs of growing cocaine abuse within South America, a region once known mainly for its export to North America and Europe. Argentina is near the top of this worrisome development, with an estimated 2.6 per cent of its 12-to-65 age group having used cocaine

at least once in 2006, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime said in June.

In the Western hemisphere, only the United States has a higher estimated usage rate, of 2.8 per cent.

Gustavo Barreiro, a Roman Catholic missionary who returned to the slum where he grew up three years ago to head the San Alberto Hurtado centre, says Villa 21 has exploded from a population of several hundred in the late 1970s to about 45,000 residents now.

Its dirt streets and rabbit warren of pathways barely wide enough for a bicycle are lined with overflowing sewers and precarious homes made of hollow bricks or metal panels.

Everyday, Barreiro and Marcos Liberatore - a counsellor, psychologist and theologian who is himself a recovered addict - comb the streets of Villa 21 to find addicts who are willing to leave paco behind. They then drive them to the recovery centre in a rickety van or an off-duty taxi.

"The damage was done before paco," Barreiro said, referring to the neighbourhood's economic deprivation.

The centre aims to help the community with one key aspect of life. Eight state-funded health centres and 18 free dining halls help with other things, while school space remains insufficient.

Paco produces only a one-minute high followed by an abrupt dysphoria, which often sends the user in search of another immediate hit. One dose sells for 1 peso (25 US cents) but an addict can spend over 300 pesos (78 dollars) in a day.

In order to finance their habit, men and boys mostly "get mean" and steal, Barreiro says.

Women and girls sell their bodies in a drug-induced state, exposing them to unprotected sex, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and demeaning violence. Premature births are common, and addicts have been known to sell their babies to buy more paco, Liberatore notes.

Such women, he stresses, must be considered addicts, not prostitutes.

A young addict - wearing flip-flops on a cold, wet winter's day - shrugs and says he cannot attend counselling because he has no shoes. Experience says that he may have sold his trainers to pay for drugs.

The San Alberto Hurtado centre offers a big pot of pasta and soft drinks. Adrian, who volunteers to cook, is a recovered alcohol and paco addict who has moved out of the slum and found a job handing out leaflets.

After lunch, the centre offers individual and group counselling, as well as activities to keep recovering addicts busy as they try to begin a new life.

Addicts - including a woman who is eight-months pregnant - name "boredom" and "impatience" as dangerous enemies, and try to focus on small achievements.

"Yesterday it was three months since I last used. For me it was an achievement, because I had been using every day," Ezequiel said. "I am going for more, but I am living day by day."

He beamed with a bit of good news: "Tomorrow I am going to start studying again."

Children as young as 10 are using paco, and the challenge remains to give them options. Prevention is a key focus. The slum parish Virgin of Caacupe runs a primary and secondary school. There are 1,000 children in scout programmes, and various NGOs offer boxing

In any discussion of cocaine and other drugs, the debate about the benefits of legalization crops up.

People like Tim Lynch of the libertarian Cato Institute believe that removing drugs from the black market would reduce crime and violence. He points to Portugal, whose recent decriminalization efforts have not led to the increased youth drug use or "drug tourism" that critics predicted.

But the UN argues that drugs must stay illegal to prevent developing countries from being plagued by street drugs the way many have been plagued by alcohol and tobacco.

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