

In Buenos Aires, 'Neighborhoods of Misery'

Slums Growing Despite Efforts to Transform Them

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BUENOS AIRES -- About 1,500 people used to live in Villa Cartón, a slapdash cluster of hundreds of crooked shacks wedged beneath a highway overpass.

Scrap-wood walls were reinforced with cardboard, old bedsheets curtained window frames. Walkways were clogged with pushcarts full of bottles and paper, the recyclable refuse that many of the people who lived there scavenged for a living.

In February, someone set fire to the shantytown, and the pumper trucks that eventually arrived could do little but water its ashes. But the fire -- and the saga that followed as officials tried to relocate the residents -- has laid bare a problem that Buenos Aires and other metropolises face as they grapple with growing slums. The most precarious parts of the city, however undesirable, are among the hardest to replace.

About one-third of the world's urban dwellers live in slums, and the United Nations estimates that the number of people living in such conditions will double by 2030 as a result of rapid urbanization in developing countries. Latin America is already the most urbanized region in the developing world, but even in places where rural migration to urban areas has begun to level off -- such as Argentina -- slums within cities continue to grow at a fast pace, through good economic times and bad.

"Throughout Latin America you have economies that are growing and doing well, but the way the economies are growing is actually generating more shantytowns," said Erik Vittrup, senior adviser on Latin America and the Caribbean for the U.N. Human Settlements Program. "It's a growth that is just generating wealth for those who have it."

Buenos Aires is recovering from a devastating economic crash in 2001, and its economy has grown by more than 8 percent annually over the past four years. Even so, population growth in the capital is fastest in its shantytowns, which continue to pop up beside railroad tracks, appear under bridges and even expand across the grounds of an ecological reserve.

The government has promoted a plan to eradicate two dozen of the worst slums -- all of them, like Villa Cartón, primitive congregations of temporary shacks built in vulnerable locations. But the Villa Cartón fire showed that even when a slum disappears, the city's problems do not.

When officials moved the displaced residents to tents in a park, ill-timed storms turned deadly, killing a woman. When the government offered the residents cash to encourage them to move out of the city and into the provinces, many refused it, saying they couldn't afford to move away from the city's free health clinics. Some who accepted the money promptly moved to other shantytowns.

Some government officials began accusing unelected slum leaders of setting the fire themselves, claiming that they feared losing power if the city carried through with plans to move more people out.

Whoever set the fire couldn't have found a more combustible target. It was pure kindling.

'We Have to Be Here'

Buenos Aires's shantytowns take several forms: villas miserias, or "neighborhoods of misery," the slums that -- with enough money and infrastructure improvements -- conceivably could be transformed into permanent neighborhoods with full services; casas tomadas, or "taken houses," usually large abandoned buildings overtaken by squatters; and asentamientos, which translates loosely as "settlements," primitive congregations of temporary shacks built in vulnerable places, like Villa Cartón. According to varying estimates from city agencies, 300,000 to 500,000 in this city of 3 million live in the slums.

One of those people is Maria Benitez, 60, who had lived in Villa Cartón for two years before it was burned down. About two weeks after the fire, she sat outside one of the tents that the city had erected for the residents. She ate a grayish gumbo of rice, potatoes and carrots that had been dished out from a nearby government trailer.

She had lived in an apartment downtown, she said, but then lost her job as a domestic servant and couldn't afford the rent.

"It's impossible for someone like me to buy land, so it was either stay in the street or go to Villa Cartón," said Benitez, who has four grown children, two of whom live in Buenos Aires.

She and the hundreds of others temporarily living in the tent complex had refused to take a government handout of \$2,300 to \$8,300 -- a subsidy designed to allow families to find other housing options. About half of the displaced residents took the money, but the other half stayed, hoping that they would be first in line for newly constructed permanent housing that the government announced would be built after the fire.

"The only place we could afford with that money would be in the province, and none of us wants to go there," said Benitez, who now works in a pay phone kiosk. "There are no jobs in the province, no services -- there's nothing. We have to be here."

The economy of Argentina -- as in most Latin American countries, with the exception of [Brazil](#) -- is dominated by the capital city. Rural areas of the continent have long been poor, fueling a migration that turned a region that was predominantly rural in 1950 into one that today is about 75 percent urban. Diminished investment in rural areas has reinforced the trend, said Vittrup, the U.N. adviser.

Hoping to remain in the city, Benitez and hundreds of her neighbors chose to remain in the tents, cursing the conditions as rains turned the ground beneath them to mud. She worked her whole life in informal jobs, not paying taxes or collecting retirement income. She said she was not about to give up on her one chance for a house that she believes she deserves.

"That's why I'll celebrate my 61st birthday here, fighting for a miserable house of my own," she said.

Anger and Impatience

The government has built several housing complexes in an effort to permanently relocate residents of the worst slums. Some have been overtaken by squatters even before their completion, delaying the handover to the slum residents for whom they were intended. The complex intended for Villa Cartón faced a different problem: Residents of the working-class neighborhood where the complex was to be built objected, forcing the government to look for a different site.

"This situation has generated another conflict -- between the lower middle class and the lower classes -- over who has rights to new housing," said Gabriela Cerutti, the city's minister of human rights in charge of housing issues.

That new conflict intensified the anger and impatience of the displaced residents of Villa Cartón, who demanded faster action from officials. After being transferred to sheds in another park, one group of residents trapped several government workers inside a trailer one evening, demanding a permanent solution.

"Suddenly about 100 people had surrounded us in the trailer, beating on it with sticks," said Patricia Malanca, one of the officials in charge of the encampment. "The hostility was extreme. Our lives were at risk."

The reason for the tension, some of the residents explained, is that they believe the government for years has been making promises to them without delivering.

According to the city auditor, Vicente Mario Brusca, inefficiency has plagued government efforts to provide adequate housing for the poor. While preparing a report on housing late last year, his office discovered that the government had paid too much for substandard materials, incurred excessive administrative costs and employed too many workers in its effort to alleviate the low-income housing shortage.

"With those rates of efficiency, we estimated that it will take 80 to 100 years to resolve the problem of housing here," Brusca said.

It is an election year, and Argentine candidates have emphasized the need to improve housing conditions in the villas miserias, to grant residents property rights and to give them full access to city services.

Meanwhile, the residents from Villa Cartón continue to wait for permanent housing, as some have for most of their lives.

Maria Estella Martinez, 42, grew up in one of the city's older, more established slums, one that has been targeted for eventual urbanization and improvement. But after

Martinez separated from her husband and faced taking care of four children alone, she was forced to take a step even lower down the social ladder into Villa Cartón.

She had hoped the move was temporary, she said, but now has begun to doubt if she'll ever get a permanent home.

She used to sell clothes to her neighbors, but the fire wiped out her inventory. The struggle to find a house after the fire, she said, has wiped out most everything else.

"I don't have the will to work anymore," she said, in tears. "I don't have the will to do anything."