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THE VERY SURVIVAL OF INFANTS IS THREATENED

Beyond the idealized image which we have of them, Latin American children survive in spite of economic and political circumstances which destroy any possibility of development and restrict their rights as subjects; although their rights are recognized in pacts and legislation which guarantee fundamental human rights, they do not have sufficient support or the strength to demand their rights on their own.

Transformed into the cause of every aspect of Latin American life which includes loss, anguish or precariousness, the foreign debt and austerity measures have placed children and their future last on the list of problems which society must resolve. According to the Division of Information and Public Affairs of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the current policy being applied by many governments that protect financial institutions to the detriment of social reform in favor of the poor has produced as a consequence a rise, in some countries, of child mortality, child malnutrition, increased abandonment of children and diminished access to education.

As for nutrition, this phenomenon has a numerical representation which forces both government and society to take

immediate action: 185 thousand Mexican children under six years of age died in 1986 from preventable causes. In the Third World 15 million children die each year. Meanwhile, governmental institutions, investigators and international organizations agree that child abuse and child labor have increased.

In Mexico, even public assistance aimed at dealing with children's problems has been reduced: official bodies such as the Mexican Institute for the Protection of Children and the Mexican Institute of Assistance for Children have disappeared, clearly showing a loss of priority for children's problems. Children are thought of as just another aspect of the diversified activities of an institution called Integral Development of the Family (DIF).

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Serious violations of children's rights have taken place more frequently in countries in the midst of armed conflict or with de facto regimes. International groups such as Men's Earth and International Defense of Children have alerted the international community about the detention and torture of children. In Chile, both groups declared in a report to the subcommission on Human Rights of the United Nations, that 21 out of 144 minors detained in 1987 for political reasons suffered abuse and another 6 reported being tortured. The report also pointed to the existence of torture cases in Mexico during the detention of minors for drug trafficking and in Peru for matters linked to terrorism. Cases of long and cruel detentions are also mentioned in Turkey, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Tibet and Uganda.

Child abuse has become a frequent practice in Mexico. The Department of Social Services of the DIF reported that during 1987 one thousand fifty declarations against child abusers were recorded in Mexico City. The Attorney General of Justice of the Federal District reported that four to six physically abused children arrived daily at the temporary shelter of this organization last year. Most of the abuse of minors according to the statistics of the DIF is perpetrated by parents in families which are usually broken.

In spite of the large number of cases that go unreported, child

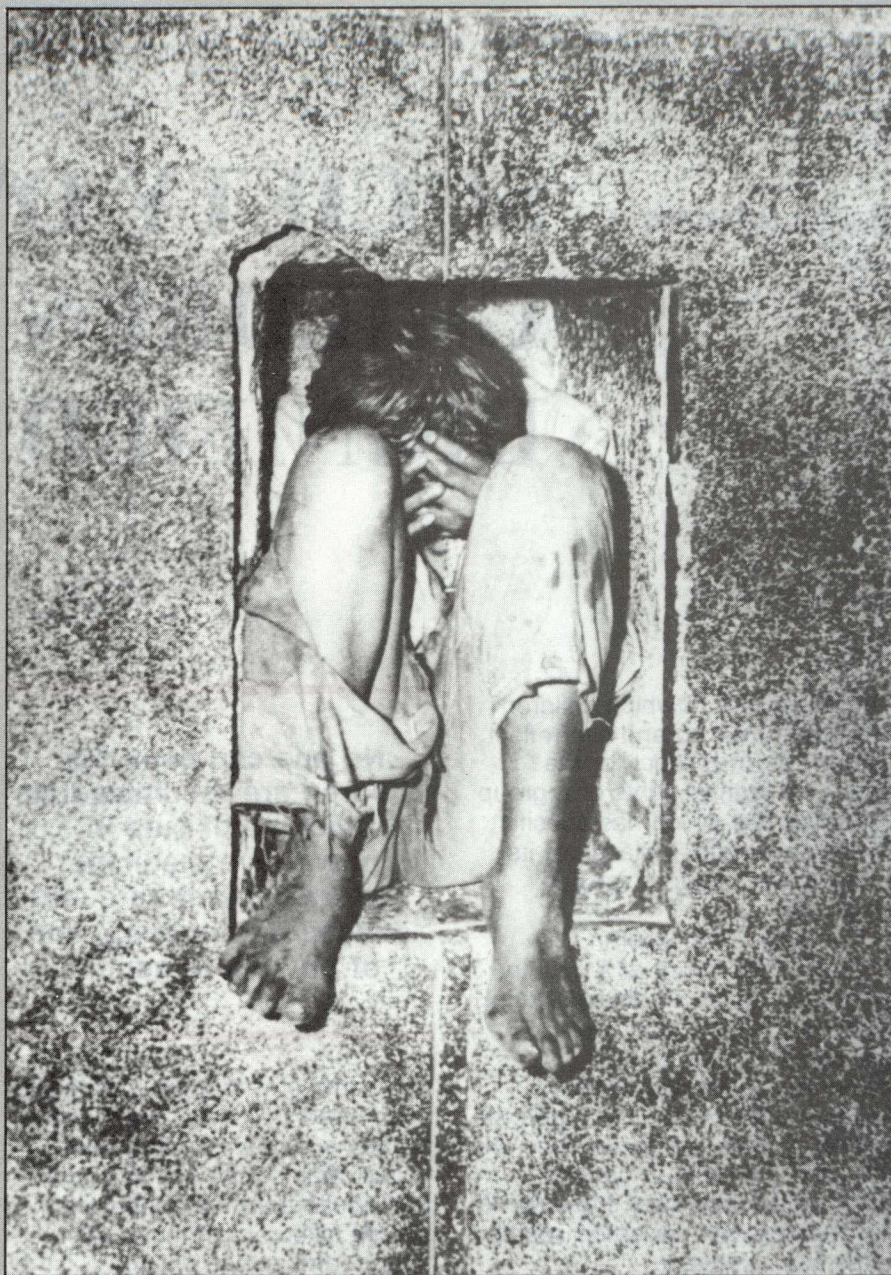
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abuse can be seen to be a phenomenon which is not only common, but growing. Because of the type of lesions suffered, human rights investigators have proposed the substitution of the term abuse with the term torture.

In effect, the Mexican Constitution prohibits all acts of violence - such as whippings, beatings, marks, and torments - which can be made against someone. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the International Pact of Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration about the Protection of All People against Torture, clearly state that "no one will be subject to tortures, punishment or cruel treatment which are inhuman or degrading".

Children are subject to torture, on the part of their parents, close relatives, and the police, according to Evangelina Lara, Director of the Rehabilitation Center for Minors who are Legal Offenders of the state of Mexico. Lara reported that various minors arrived at the Center "brutally beaten by the police in order to make them declare themselves guilty of various crimes". The director added that these children had refused to make legal declarations against their attackers because they or their families had received death threats.

The Institution for the Defense of Minors and the DIF stated that from January to April of 1989 the organization had received 6 thousand reports of child abuse.



Child in the belly of concrete. Photo by Héctor García, Foto Press.

Millions of children lack the conditions which make possible healthy and dignified development. According to the Institute of Education for Street Children, there are close to 8 million abandoned children in the metropolitan area of Mexico City; 70 percent of them are sometime drug users, and the remaining 30 percent are alcoholics, delinquents or subemployed. Moises Vidales, coordinator of the institution, explained that constitutional guarantees for minors are not enforced.

Even though the Mexican Constitution contains guarantees which protect the fundamental

rights of man, it does not contain explicit references to children's rights. Some Mexican legal experts consider these rights to be implicit in the Constitution and that it would only be necessary to elaborate a special code. Nevertheless, various Mexican organizations that protect children's rights have recently insisted on the necessity of revising the Constitution and creating a code which systematically organizes the inherent rights of Mexican children, especially those which protect children up to six years of age. □