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No food, no teachers, violence in failing Venezuela schools

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CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) -- Maria Arias slipped her notebooks into her backpack, scrounged for a banana to share with her brother and sister, and set off for high school through narrow streets so violent taxis will not come here for any price. She hoped at least one of her teachers would show up.

But her 7 a.m. art class was canceled when the instructor called in sick. History class was suspended. There was no gym class because the coach had been shot dead weeks earlier. And in the afternoon, her Spanish teacher collected homework and then sent the students home to meet a gang-imposed curfew.

"It's a trap," the slight 14-year-old with pink lipstick complained as she sat in the shade of a picked-over mango tree at the school's entrance. "You risk your life to be here and end up

waiting around for hours doing nothing. But you have to keep coming because it's the only way out."

The soaring crime and economic chaos stalking Venezuela is also ripping apart a once up-and-coming school system, robbing poor students such as Maria of any chance at a better life. Officially, Venezuela has canceled 16 school days since December, including Friday classes because of an energy crisis.

In reality, Venezuelan children have missed an average of 40 percent of class time, a parent group estimates, as a third of teachers skip work on any given day to wait in food lines. At Maria's school, so many students have fainted from hunger that administrators told parents to keep their children home if they have no food. And while the school locks its gate each morning, armed robbers, often teens themselves, still manage to break in and stick up kids between classes.

"This country has abandoned its children. By the time we see the full consequences, there will be no way to put it right," Movement of Organized Parents spokeswoman Adelba Taffin said.

Venezuela is a young nation, with more than a third of the population under age 15, and until recently its schools were among the best in South America. The late President Hugo Chavez made education a centerpiece of his socialist revolution,

using the riches from a historic boom in the price of oil to train teachers and distribute free laptops. The government even renovated Maria's 1,700-student school and installed a new cafeteria.

In just a few years, all of that progress has been undone. A fall in the price of oil combined with years of economic mismanagement has brought the country to its knees, along with many of its 7 million public school students. The annual dropout rate has doubled, more than a quarter of teenagers are not enrolled, and classrooms are understaffed as professionals flee the country.

Maria's school sits between a slum and what was once a middle-class neighborhood in the capital, Caracas. There is even less food, water and electricity outside Caracas, where schools shut down for weeks at a time.

Chatty and so studious that her classmates call her "Wikipedia," Maria started the year with dreams of becoming an accountant and moving to Paris. Her parents had saved up to buy her 12 new notebooks, one for each subject. Nine months later, most of the pages are still blank.

Maria has a two-hour free period instead of English. Her sister isn't being taught math.

Her accounting teacher recently went missing for a week and a half. When she returned one afternoon, teacher Betty Cubillan limited herself to correcting homework. Maria used a friend's phone as a calculator to try to figure out why her answers had too many zeros, while her classmates lay with their heads on their desks.

Cubillan says she comes to class as much as she can while hustling to get by on \$30 a month.

"If I don't line up, I don't eat. Who's going to do it for me?" Cubillan said.

As many as 40 percent of teachers skip class on any given day to wait in food lines that snake through Caracas like spider veins, according to the Venezuela Teacher's Federation. School director Helena Porras has asked nearby supermarkets to let teachers cut in line. And she's disciplined staff for selling students passing grades in exchange for scarce goods like milk and flour.

But appeals to a teacher's sense of shame don't go far in a country that is now among the most violent and lawless in the world.

Maria has seen robberies, lootings and lynch mobs on her way to school. One day, she held her breath on the bus as a man

jabbed a gun into the neck of the woman next to her and stole a wedding ring. Another time, she broke into a run toward the school as vigilantes pressed in on an accused thief lying bloodied on the ground.

The locked metal gate at the school's sole entrance makes the cavernous building feel like a prison, but students seem glad for the extra protection. One recent afternoon, dozens of kids waited patiently to get out. No one could find the worker with the key.

Robbers still find ways in, though, and students are quick to give each other up, pointing to friends who have valuables to shift attention from themselves. Maria was held up once by a boy so baby-faced that she assumed he was her 15-year-old sister's classmate. He leveled a gun at her sister's ribs and demanded the girls' phones.

Even the other students can be dangerous. One day a boy doused a classroom with a container of gas, planning to burn down the building. The smell was so strong that Maria was dizzy. Her mind went to the locked gate.

"I'm scared every day. Your heart leaps into your throat and you're like, 'Jeez, I thought a school was supposed to be safe,'" she said.

Maria's school looks less like a place of education than a downtown bus terminal; grimy, smelling of urine, and full of people waiting for something that may not come.

Classrooms with puddles are used as emergency toilets now that the bathrooms have no running water. Students play dice on the cracked asphalt of the yard, trading insults and piles of bills. The patio was used for gym class until the teacher was killed in crossfire this spring while working a second job as a barber, one of several teachers slain in the city this year.

Maria's parents worry most about boys; Venezuela now has the highest teen pregnancy rate in South America. The favorite make-out spot for students is behind a pile of 30,000 unopened textbooks that block the auditorium stage. The government delivered the books at the start of the year, but teachers decided they were too full of pro-socialist propaganda to use.

The supplies they really want are not available. In chemistry class, students can't perform experiments because they have no materials. The new cafeteria never opened because there was no food or cooking gas, so Maria and her friends drink water from home instead of eating lunch.

"When I was in school, they gave us lab coats and we experimented on rats," freshman coordinator Rosa Ramirez said. "And they fed us two meals a day."

As food grows scarce, schools have reported dozens of cafeteria robberies. This month, thieves beat a security guard to death at one school so they could make off with the cafeteria's food.

That leaves children with nothing to eat at home or in school. A quarter of Venezuelan children missed class this year because of hunger, according to the national research group Foundation Bengoa.

"I have one student who missed the whole year," earth sciences teacher Berli Jaspe said. "We're going to pass her anyway. It's not these kids' fault the country is falling apart."

Other students stay home because they have no running water to wash their uniforms. Maria's mother cut into the family's food budget last month to take the children's clothes to a laundry service instead.

Maria helps when she can. Her teachers rarely see her on Thursdays, her government-assigned grocery shopping day. One recent morning, her mother asked her to leave art class because a store across town was selling flour.

By the time Maria arrived, the stock already had run out. She raced back to school to make her afternoon math exam. But when she got there, the math teacher hadn't shown up. It was

his shopping day, too.

That night, Maria remarked bitterly that the metro is the cheapest thing you can buy in Caracas; if you pay for one ticket and throw yourself in front of a train, all your problems are over.

Parents say they struggle to guide teenagers through situations they find hard to accept themselves.

Maria's classmate Roberly Bernal wanted to drop out after a group of seniors threatened to stab her. Her father began walking her to class every morning to protect her. Then, in April, he was murdered by a mob that accused him of stealing \$5.

Now, Roberly is at a loss. Her mother would like her to talk to a therapist, but the school's two counselors retired last year.

Maria's mother Aracelis knows her children's grades have fallen this year, though she isn't sure how much. The school has not had supplies to print up report cards.

"I dropped out my freshman year and it set me back," she said. "Maria goes almost every day, but I don't know if she's doing much better. Venezuela must have done something very terrible to be punished like this."

When the school day ended, Maria put off returning home and lingered in the hall with friends. A classmate showed them a

baby sparrow he'd grabbed out of a tree in the yard. "We should eat it," he said.

The girls crowded in, examining the fluffy bird. Maria squealed with delight when it opened its wings. It was the first time she had laughed all day.

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