



At a School for the Poor, a Mysterious Illness

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CHALCO, Mexico, April 11, The teenage girls hobbled into a prayer meeting at their Roman Catholic boarding school, their knees buckling with every step. For months, a mysterious illness had swept through their school, afflicting hundreds of girls, and they were there to ask for recovery.

The first isolated cases of the illness, which affected the girls walking and made them feverish and nauseated, appeared in November and December. After the girls came back from Christmas break, the illness spread. By February, the school director, Sister Margie Cheong, had become alarmed and alerted the authorities.

At the Wednesday prayer meeting, Sister Michaela Shim handed out cookies and began to tell a story in her Korean-accented Spanish. The girls laughed and shouted as her improvised parable unfolded. It was the story of a boy who lies to get attention.

What may be happening here is far more complex. After batteries of tests, doctors now believe that the illness that has struck 600 of the 3,600 girls at this charity-run school is psychological.

In medical terms, Mexico public health authorities have concluded that the girls at the Children Village School are suffering from a mass psychogenic disorder. In layman language, they have a collective hysteria.

It is a diagnosis that doctors are usually hesitant to make, concerned they might miss any other cause and uncomfortable with 19th-century images of screaming girls, trances or collective delusions.

But Dr. Vtor Manuel Torres Meza, the director of epidemiology for the Mexico State health department, said there were some 80 documented cases from around the world. They are usually in closed communities, like schools and factories, and they tend to occur more frequently among adolescents and among girls.

He has a group of only girls living under a situation of strict control and discipline that they have to follow to the letter, Dr. Torres Meza said. These illnesses occur in closed groups that have no external communication. Emotional factors have a cumulative effect. What is the trigger?

About 20 psychiatrists and psychologists from federal hospitals have begun private interviews with the girls who are still sick or have been sick, he said, adding that he hoped to have a preliminary report by the end of the month.

When the scale of the illness became clear, the school allowed parents to take their daughters out for a week. The sick ones promptly recovered, and they have been trickling back to school, somewhat to the surprise of reporters and television crews outside the gates who have crowded the girls and their families to look for evidence of mistreatment inside.

He needs support, not scandal, Sister Cheong said in an interview at the school. She seemed visibly exhausted by the news media attention and clearly concerned that it might scare away some of the donations she needed for the school \$4 million operating budget.

The school, founded in 1990, is one of 10 in Asia and Latin America operated by a charity called World Villages for Children. It is run by nuns from the Sisters of Mary, an order founded in South Korea in 1964 by an American priest, Msgr. Aloysius Schwartz.

The school here offers three years of middle school and two years of technical high school to girls ages 12 to 17.

The expansive campus is at the dust-veiled edge of Chalco, this vast working-class suburb of Mexico City. With a population of as many as half a million, Chalco is a watchword in Mexico for urban poverty. An unplanned settlement of concrete-block houses that the owners can never afford to finish, Chalco has mushroomed over the past 30 years as migrants have moved from the countryside to look for work in the capital.

But within the school metal gates are trimmed hedges and well-tended lawns, sports fields, a swimming pool and a gymnasium that holds 4,000. In a bizarre touch, an ostrich, the school mascot, wanders through a corner garden.

The girls, from some of Mexico's poorest regions, race from computer classes, to choir rehearsal, to tae kwon do classes. Dorms are spotless and spartan: donated toys are displayed untouched above the closets, and the girls sleep 40 to a dorm in three-story bunks.

Officials said they had found no evidence of mistreatment, although they acknowledged that the girls were tightly disciplined and very isolated. The girls see their parents at most three times a year: two weeks in July, 10 days at Christmas and on parents' day, which is usually in May. There are no phone calls and few letters.

The school justifies its policy as being fair to those girls whose families live far away and cannot visit them regularly.

the girls miss their families,Sister Cheong said. but here we form character. A girl here is no longer an Indian girl from the mountains. She knows how to express herself, she knows how to smile. They have confidence.

The parents who returned their cured daughters seemed grateful for what they considered an opportunity for an education. And many advanced their own explanation, a longing for home.

Maybe if we could talk on the phone once a month ...?suggested Efr Contreras Garc, a peasant farmer from Oaxaca.

The girls themselves say they do not know what has caused their illness. Maybe it because of the problems at home,said Alma Delia Avenda, 15, on her first day back at school after a week at home, where she had recovered. She said her parents were separated.

Sister Cheong pointed out that many of the girls came from Indian families or regions of the country where superstitions run very deep. When talking to the parents, many of them believe that God lives most where evil is most active,?she said.

Or they may believe their illness is a blessing.

Mar Leyda Aguilar, 14, sat on the gymnasium floor while her classmates went through a dance and aerobics routine. After a month, she is getting better. I have taken it with joy,?she said of her illness. Perhaps it was a test that God has given me. Maybe God shows his care through his way.

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