

Children without parents: the unfortunate aftermath of the Argentine military in Haiti

Since 2007, the UN Peacekeepers sought to develop peace in an unstable country and devastated by an earthquake. Thirteen years later, a collective grievance of abuse and neglect grows: Haitian women sue Argentine soldiers for the paternity of children. In Port-au-Prince, RED / ACCIÓN spoke with one of them.

**Since the investigation covered by this note is ongoing and there is a minor involved, the names Rosaline, Stevenson and Ricardo are fictitious, to protect the identity of the victims.*

Port Au Prince- The air that fills the office in the center of the Haitian capital is heavy, hot, typical for September, one of the most humid months on the island. In a meeting room where there is hardly any air, we wait next to Reginald, my translator, for Rosaline to arrive. It is September 2018, and I am completing a two-week trip in Haiti. My meeting with Rosaline is the last one before returning to Buenos Aires.

Finally, after an hour of waiting and with the sun beginning to set gradually behind the hills of Port-au-Prince, her figure appears timidly at the door. Dark complexion, short hair and dressed in pink, explains that she hesitated to come, to share her story, to relieve her suffering. What convinced her? "I do it for my son," she told us, sat in an armchair, and began telling her story.

It was in December 2010, eleven months after the earthquake that devastated Haiti and left more than 200,000 dead - including her then husband and father of her first child - when Rosaline met Ricardo. They were both shopping at Granite, a local supermarket, when Ricardo approached him to speak.

"He told me that I was very pretty, that he had just arrived in the country two days ago, that he didn't know much and that if I could show him the city. I gave him my home number and after a few days he called me to go out with some friends," Rosaline says quietly, and pausing for Reginald to translate. "After that we kept talking, going out several times, until we started dating."

They spent dated for six months, falling into a routine together. During the day, Ricardo, a soldier and army driver, worked as a driver for other Argentine military personnel deployed in the country as Peacekeepers of the United Nations Mission for Stabilization in Haiti (MINUSTAH). But he spent his free time with Rosaline. "We slept together, we woke up together, we went out, we shared many things," Rosaline says.

In May 2011, after several months of dating, Rosaline became pregnant. But in June, Ricardo concluded his mission and returned to Argentina.

"He knew that I was pregnant and that I had a due date for January. He told me that he would return in December, to be when here when I gave birth. But he did not come back. I wrote him several times on Facebook and he never replied."

Stories that repeat themselves

The legacy of the Peacekeepers in Haiti has pros and cons. While these forces played a crucial role in stabilizing the country and in strengthening local security institutions (an objective that highlighted the valuable work of Argentine Peacekeepers on the island), they were also responsible for bringing cholera to Haiti and at least 134 soldiers are involved in cases of sexual abuse.

Although the story of Rosaline and Ricardo is distinct, it is not unique, and a recent study brought to light the scale of this problem. The study was based on 2,500 interviews conducted in different communities in Haiti, and revealed that at least 265 Haitian women and girls had children with men who worked for the United Nations.

The interviews, led by an English professor and a Canadian scientist, also revealed that girls as young as 11 years old were sexually abused and had children fathered by UN Peacekeepers, to then be "left in misery", raising their children alone. Those babies are known as "little minustahs."

The vast majority of the personnel involved in these stories are from Uruguay and Brazil (75 and 58 cases, respectively). Argentina comes in fourth in identified nationalities, with almost 20 cases of pregnancies related to Argentine officers or non-commissioned officers.

In some cases, such as Rosaline's, pregnancy was the result of consensual relationships, some more casual, and others more serious. Other cases involved explicit sexual abuse. But according to the study, the vast majority of pregnancies arose from a less known problem: "transactional" sex. In these cases, women and girls received food or money in exchange for having sex with members of MINUSTAH.

After the parents have been repatriated to their respective countries of origin, these mothers assumed the responsibility of raising their children alone, in contexts of extreme poverty and the vast majority without receiving any assistance from the Haitian government, the UN, NGOs, or the armed forces of the countries in charge of the respective Peacekeepers. As if that were not enough, many of the young mothers, like Rosaline, were also forced to leave their own homes.

"My family took the news of pregnancy very badly. They don't even want to see me anymore, they say I humiliated them a lot. Now I no longer live with my family," says Rosaline, who since she had her son does not have a stable home and lives in neighboring homes that allow her to stay for two or three days. In the absence of work, the little that Rosaline gets to eat is through friends. "There are many days that I don't eat. If I have food, I cook for my children to eat."

A turbulent legal path

"The UN says to promote human rights, children's rights, but clearly they are not respecting the human rights of Haitians," says Mario Joseph, a lawyer at the Bureau des Avocats Internationaux (BAI), a Haitian lawyer organization that represents to victims of cholera and sexual abuse on the island.

At the end of 2017, together with the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH), an American organization, BAI filed lawsuits for paternity on behalf of 11 children (from 10 different mothers) before the Haitian court. Among them is Stevenson, the now 9-year old son of Roseline.

"The ultimate goal is for fathers to recognize their children and for mothers to get some kind of support," says Sienna Merope-Synge, an IJDH lawyer.

But the legal path is not easy and requires the active participation of the UN and the government of the Peacekeeper's nationality involved to manage DNA evidence and information about the whereabouts of the alleged father.

"If this evidence is obtained, the judge analyzes these results and dictates his ruling. If it is in favor of the woman, the judge orders that support be provided. From there, it depends on the execution of the sentence," explains Merope-Synge. "The UN should recognize the ruling, go to the country involved, and request that the support be provided, which may be by the government or the individual, depending on local law."

The legal case of Rosaline

According to Merope-Synge, in 2019, Rosaline received the results of the DNA test conducted by the UN to verify that Stevenson was indeed Ricardo's son. The result was positive.

In response, Rosaline's lawyers confirmed that the UN granted her financial assistance for victims, which includes support for housing and school costs. However, according to Merope-Synge, support is not enough to survive and cover the costs of the basic needs of the family.

Meanwhile, Rosaline has not yet received any kind of support from the Argentine government or directly from Ricardo. Official sources of the Ministry of Defense consulted by RED / ACCIÓN referred to the issue very briefly: "Our priority is to guarantee the rights of children and women, and we are working quickly to resolve these cases."

According to the same source, there are currently four cases of paternity against Argentine military by Haitian women being investigated, and the management he assumed with the new government "is working for the four Haitian women to have legal representatives in Argentina." In the event that justice fails in favor of the mothers, the responsibility for support would fall on the accused individual, not on the government.

Meanwhile, spokesmen for the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces confirmed to RED / ACCIÓN that the Argentine Ministry of Defense is "actively cooperating with the UN while we work to resolve these cases of paternity."

The hope of a discovery in Argentina

Back in Port-au-Prince, the sun has already set, and Roseline is getting ready to return home. The motorcycle trip is long, more than 40 minutes, and her children are waiting for her.

When talking about Stevenson, a smile comes to her face

"He is the same as his dad, he has his build and his personality. He is very intelligent, his grades average out to nine out of ten. He always asks me when we are going to Argentina to meet his dad," she says as

her eyes begin to well with tears. “All I want is for his dad to be aware and take care of the child, give him a place so he can sleep, so he can live like the other children. I hope that this message gets to him somehow.”

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