

Living in Fear: the children of El Cercado

From her bed, 9-year-old Alesandra Encarnación catches glimpses of the sky as she prays. Innocent hazel eyes direct her prayers up through holes in the roof overhead. As she envisions her prayers rising to heaven, Alesandra fears that the very thing she stares through — the fragile roof — will one day come crashing down upon her.

In the El Cercado region of the Dominican Republic, Alesandra's family huddles together inside a hut made of wooden poles and topped with palm fronds and corrugated metal. It's a small structure that can barely shelter the family of four. "Whoever lives in this, it's almost like living in the streets," observes Danilo Encarnación, Alesandra's father.

A few flimsy poles prop up the front of Alesandra's hovel, and she, her two parents and baby brother search for peace amid impending danger.

“I’m worried that the house will fall apart. I try to get myself distracted,” explains Alesandra’s mother, Mercedes. The desperate mother cradles her wailing 2-year-old boy Danilson, who is constantly sick. Rain frequently seeps in on the children, producing colds, congestion and fever. The one mattress that the family sleeps on becomes soaked.



**“My soul is deprived of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is...”
(Lamentations 3:17)**

May and June are the worst months in El Cercado because of the area’s high winds. Last year at this time, the Encarnacións witnessed their neighbors fleeing their shack just before it crumbled a few feet from theirs.

Today, the Encarnacións huddle together even closer as the storm season approaches. The anxious family attempts to sleep, wondering if their home will withstand the next strong wind. Mercedes prays for a miracle.



If Alesandra’s nightmare of the roof collapsing is realized this season, her family will be forced to migrate — combing the land for a new spot to piece together another makeshift hut. “We have nowhere else to go,” agonizes Mercedes.

This is the plight of unsheltered families throughout El Cercado. Growing up in patched huts of wood and metal, innocent children never experience the comfort and protection of a sturdy home.



Adrian Morillo is another child who suffers from a lack of adequate shelter. The 7-year-old, his mother and two little brothers live in a shack a short distance from the Encarnacións.

A sunken mattress is the focal point inside his family’s home. A few feet from the mattress, a dirty pair of jeans, a sweater and a T-shirt are laid out on the muddy floor. This is where the younger children sleep when it rains. Their mattress becomes so wet that the little boys are forced to find any dry spots on the ground and sleep on their meager clothing.

Adrian, however, has another option for sleeping when it rains. The boy totes two wooden chairs around the hut, seeking a dry spot. If a leak-free area is found, he spreads the chairs apart just enough so his little extended body can balance upon them.

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As the eldest child, Adrian acts as the father figure of the household. His younger brothers shadow him. Recently, when his mother, Mari, left home to try to harvest crops, a bandit entered the unprotected shack to steal what little food the family had. A frightened Adrian did what he could to defend his vulnerable home. A few items were taken, but fortunately no harm was done to the children.

*“... stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong.”
(1 Corinthians 16:13b)*

**“I would soon find a shelter
from the raging wind and storm.”
(Psalm 55:9)**



Treacherous housing conditions endanger children across El Cercado. “Things fall... they rot and they fall,” explains Adrian, describing the dwelling.

At some places in El Cercado, one can look through the broken frame of an already fallen structure to view another endangered home.

As most of us rest easily under a sturdy roof at night, let us remember to pray for these desperately unsheltered families and their children. May we also remember the amazing impact our generosity can make in sheltering unprotected children. One sturdy roof and a secure dwelling can make a world of difference to a child attempting to escape the clutches of extreme poverty. ❖