

Money and politics



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By Guillermo Alvarado

Incredible as it may seem in the United States, the richest country and the first military power on the planet, these days millions of families are living in anguish due to the absence on the shelves of a basic food -- the milk formula intended for the nutrition of babies.

Numerous factors are involved in this unusual situation, among them the characteristic features of the production system in the North American nation, where a strong protectionist policy is applied to hinder the access of foreign firms to the domestic market.

Thus, the so-called formula milk is in the hands of four large firms, Abbott, Gerber, Mead Johnson and Perrigo Nutritionals, which supply almost one hundred percent of the national demand.

The largest of these, Abbott, had to close its main plants and withdraw its product from the market due to the discovery of a bacterium in its formula, which infected four infants, two of whom died.

When this dairy product became scarce, fear set in among households that flocked to make panic purchases, which resulted in shortages in almost the entire country. The big question is: why did people react in this way?

Here another factor of this society comes into play. In the perfect democracy there is no paid maternity leave, women who give birth must use their vacation days or take unpaid leave which, by law, can only be granted by companies with more than 50 workers.

As a result, pregnancy, childbirth and newborn care become a serious problem for women and families in general.

As a result, the World Health Organization's recommendation to feed a baby exclusively with breast milk for the first six months is only available to 25 percent of women, and is non-existent for the rest, particularly the poorest women who depend on a job for a living.

Hence, the use of milk formulas is truly indispensable.

The transnational Abbott has already received authorization to reopen its main factory, but warned that it will take weeks to reach normal supply again, so the crisis will continue.

In these circumstances, the White House had to make use of the Defense Production Act, a wartime regulation, to accelerate the production of milk formula. It also authorized increased flights to import this food, even with Pentagon planes.

Things are true, my friend Sancho, as that tireless and romantic fighter, Don Quixote de la Mancha, has said.

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