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More Children in Greece Are Going Hungry

By **LIZ ALDERMAN**

ATHENS — As an elementary school principal, Leonidas Nikas is used to seeing children play, laugh and dream about the future. But recently he has seen something altogether different, something he thought was impossible in Greece: children picking through school trash cans for food; needy youngsters asking playmates for leftovers; and an 11-year-old boy, Pantelis Petrakis, bent over with hunger pains.

“He had eaten almost nothing at home,” Mr. Nikas said, sitting in his cramped school office near the port of Piraeus, a working-class suburb of Athens, as the sound of a jump rope skittered across the playground. He confronted Pantelis’s parents, who were ashamed and embarrassed but admitted that they had not been able to find work for months. Their savings were gone, and they were living on rations of pasta and ketchup.

“Not in my wildest dreams would I expect to see the situation we are in,” Mr. Nikas said. “We have reached a point where children in Greece are coming to school hungry. Today, families have difficulties not only of employment, but of survival.”

The Greek economy is in free fall, having shrunk by 20 percent in the past five years. The unemployment rate is more than 27 percent, the highest in Europe, and 6 of 10 job seekers say they have not worked in more than a year. Those dry statistics are reshaping the lives of Greek families with children, more of whom are arriving at schools hungry or underfed, even malnourished, according to private groups and the government itself.

Last year, an estimated 10 percent of Greek elementary and middle school students suffered from what public health professionals call “food insecurity,” meaning they faced hunger or the risk of it, said Dr. Athena Linos, a professor at the University of Athens Medical School who also heads a food assistance program at **Prolepsis**, a nongovernmental public health group that has studied the situation. “When it comes to food insecurity, Greece has now fallen to the level of some African countries,” she said.

Unlike those in the United States, Greek schools do not offer subsidized cafeteria lunches. Students bring their own food or buy items from a canteen. The cost has become insurmountable for some families with little or no income. Their troubles have been

compounded by new austerity measures demanded by Greece's creditors, including higher electricity taxes and cuts in subsidies for large families. As a result, parents without work are seeing their savings and benefits rapidly disappear.

"All around me I hear kids saying: 'My parents don't have any money. We don't know what we are going to do,'" said Evangelia Karakaxa, a vivacious 15-year-old at the No. 9 junior high school in Acharnes.

Acharnes, a working-class town among the mountains of Attica, was bustling with activity from imports until the economic crisis wiped out thousands of factory jobs.

Now, several of Evangelia's classmates are frequently hungry, she said, and one boy recently fainted. Some children were starting to steal for food, she added. While she does not excuse it, she understands their plight. "Those who are well fed will never understand those who are not," she said.

"Our dreams are crushed," added Evangelia, whose parents are unemployed but who is not in the same dire situation as her peers. She paused, then continued in a low voice. "They say that when you drown, your life flashes before your eyes. My sense is that in Greece, we are drowning on dry land."

Alexandra Perri, who works at the school, said that at least 60 of the 280 students suffered from malnutrition. Children who once boasted of sweets and meat now talk of eating boiled macaroni, lentils, rice or potatoes. "The cheapest stuff," Ms. Perri said.

This year the number of malnutrition cases jumped. "A year ago, it wasn't like this," Ms. Perri, said, fighting back tears. "What's frightening is the speed at which it is happening."

The government, which initially dismissed the reports as exaggerations, recently acknowledged that it needed to tackle the issue of malnutrition in schools. But with priorities placed on repaying bailout funds, there is little money in Greek coffers to cope.

Mr. Nikas, the principal, said he knew that the Greek government was laboring to fix the economy. Now that talk of Greece's exiting the euro zone has disappeared, things look better to the outside world. "But tell that to the family of Pantelis," he said. "They don't feel the improvement in their lives."

In the family's darkened apartment near the school, Themelina Petrakis, Pantelis's mother, opened her refrigerator and cupboards one recent weekend. Inside was little more than a few bottles of ketchup and other condiments, some macaroni and leftovers from a meal she had gotten from the town hall.

The family was doing well and was even helping others in need until last year. The Petrakis were able to afford a spacious apartment with a flat-screen TV and a PlayStation.

Then her husband, Michalis, 41, was laid off from his shipping job in December. He said the company had not paid his wages for five months before that. The couple could no longer afford rent, and by February they had run out of money.

“When the principal called, I had to tell him, ‘We don’t have food,’ ” said Ms. Petrakis, 36, cradling Pantelis’s head as he cast his eyes to the ground.

Mr. Petrakis said he felt emasculated after repeatedly failing to find new work. When food for the family ran low, he stopped eating almost entirely, and rapidly lost weight.

“When I was working last summer, I even threw away excess bread,” he said, tears streaming down his face. “Now, I sit here with a war running through my head, trying to figure out how we will live.”

When the hunger comes, Ms. Petrakis has a solution. “It’s simple,” she said. “You get hungry, you get dizzy and you sleep it off.”

A 2012 Unicef report showed that among the poorest Greek households with children, more than 26 percent had an “economically weak diet.” The phenomenon has hit immigrants hardest but is spreading quickly among Greeks in urban areas where one or both parents are effectively permanently unemployed.

In rural areas, people can at least grow food. But that is not enough to eradicate the problem. An hour’s drive northwest of Athens, in the industrial town of Aspropigkos, Nicos Tsoufar, 42, stared vacantly ahead as he sat in the middle school that his three children attend. The school receives lunches from a program run by Prolepsis, the public health group. Mr. Tsoufar said his children desperately needed the meals.

He has not found work for three years. Now, he said, his family is living on what he called a “cabbage-based diet,” which it supplements by foraging for snails in nearby fields. “I know you can’t cover nutritional basics with cabbage,” he said bitterly. “But there’s no alternative.”

The government and groups like Prolepsis are doing what they can. Last year, Prolepsis started a pilot program providing a sandwich, fruit and milk at 34 public schools where more than half of the 6,400 families participating said they had experienced “medium to serious hunger.”

After the program, that percentage dropped to 41 percent. Financed by an \$8 million grant from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, an international philanthropic organization, the program was expanded this year to cover 20,000 children at 120 schools.

Konstantinos Arvanitopoulos, Greece's education minister, said the government had secured European Union financing to provide fruit and milk in schools, and vouchers for bread and cheese. It is also working with the Greek Orthodox Church to provide thousands of care packages. "It is the least we can do in this difficult financial circumstance," he said.

Mr. Nikas, the principal at 11-year-old Pantelis's school, has taken matters into his own hands and is organizing food drives at the school. He is angry at what he sees as broader neglect of Greece's troubles by Europe.

"I'm not saying we should just wait for others to help us," he said. "But unless the European Union acts like this school, where families help other families because we're one big family, we're done for."

Dimitris Bounias contributed reporting.