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Argentine Provincial Governor Under Investigation for Illicit Enrichment

by LADB Staff

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The governor of Argentina's northern province of Tucuman, retired Gen. Antonio Domingo Bussi, is under investigation for illicit enrichment and for failing to declare a secret Swiss bank account. Bussi also faces disciplinary action by the army. The bank account was discovered by Spanish authorities investigating the disappearance of more than 600 Spanish citizens in Argentina during the military dictatorship (1976- 1983). Bussi won a seat in Congress in 1993 and was elected governor in 1995.

Voters supported Bussi despite charges of human rights violations during the dictatorship when he headed the military government in Tucuman, 1,300 km northeast of Buenos Aires. As commander of the Third Battalion, Bussi was responsible for the disappearance of 600 people, according to human rights groups. After Argentina's return to democracy, Bussi faced charges of human rights abuses, including taking part in firing squads, but he was among those covered by the 1987 amnesty laws.

During his political career, he has never publicly repudiated the repression or his activities. On the contrary, he has said he is proud of what he did while in the military. Bussi is one of six current or former military officers who participated in the "dirty war" repression, whose Swiss bank accounts have recently come to light. Another of the six is confessed torturer Alfredo Astiz, (see NotiSur, 01/16/98 and 02/13/98). When newspapers first broke the story of Bussi's secret account, the general denied it. Later, he admitted that he had an account in a Swiss bank between 1986 and 1996, but said he "forgot" to mention it in the sworn declaration he made when he took his seat in Congress in 1993.

Provincial legislature calls on Bussi to resign

In the province, thousands have participated in demonstrations called by opposition groups demanding that the governor step down, or, if he refuses, that he be impeached. Backers of Bussi, who have also staged demonstrations in his support, are pulling out all stops to save his job. As part of their strategy, they tried to keep the matter in the court system and out of the legislature. Nevertheless, following the revelations about the Swiss account, the Tucuman legislature passed a resolution on Feb. 23 by a 23 to 15 margin, questioning Bussi's fitness to govern and calling on him to step down.

Despite the vote and the protests in Tucuman, analysts point out that impeaching the governor will be difficult because the 19 Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) state deputies are divided on impeachment, which would require a two-thirds vote in the unicameral legislature. The Union Civica Radical (UCR) has six deputies who would all support impeachment, while the 15 deputies from Bussi's Fuerza Republicana would oppose it.

In the state legislature, Bussi supporters and the most conservative PJ deputies have often voted together. On March 6, however, the provincial legislature's Comision de Juicio Politico agreed to

formally investigate the charges against Bussi, which could make eventual impeachment more likely.

In addition, federal prosecutor Paul Starc is investigating Bussi for illegal enrichment and tax evasion and for giving false statements regarding his finances. The judge is examining allegations that Bussi's wealth, including properties in the names of his wife and four children, is far more than he could have acquired on the salary he received during his military career. Opponents allege that the Swiss account possibly contains assets taken from victims of the repression.

Based on the testimony of survivors and relatives of victims, human rights groups estimate that the armed forces stole US\$70 million in assets including cash, cars, real estate, and jewelry from those they detained. The groups say it was common practice for the military to loot the homes of people arrested on suspicion of subversion, confiscate their autos and real estate, and then resell them, and to extort money from business associates and family members of those detained.

Bussi insists his account was not used to deposit monies plundered during the years of military rule. He said assets in the account were the result of a lifetime of savings, an inheritance from his parents, and earnings made as an advisor to military forces in other countries during his military career.

Meanwhile, in what could prove most damaging to the pride of a career military officer, a military Tribunal de Honor is investigating Bussi for violations of military ethics and, if he is found guilty, will decide what punishment the offenses merit. Military sources have speculated that a reprimand for "serious errors" will likely go into his file. The decision is expected within the coming week. President Carlos Saul Menem, who has been extremely critical of the legal proceedings in Spain and of what he calls opposition efforts to "discredit" the military, gave the green light to army chief Gen. Martin Balza to proceed with the military investigation.

Although government officials have said they would "not lift a finger" to protect Bussi, the general has been in contact with Menem and met with him at the presidential palace. Resurgence of human rights concerns The strong reaction against Bussi is another example of the renewed concern about human rights violations that occurred during the military repression. Human rights groups have spearheaded a campaign for justice in the thousands of "disappearances" that took place during those years.

Nobel laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel said this year the fiftieth anniversary of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights the battle against impunity has taken on a special impetus throughout the region. He said the resurgence of human rights groups in Argentina was taking place in a context where the political leaders, both of the governing party and the opposition, are "slaves to their own fears" of attacking the impunity of the military repressors.

A survey in January by the Ricardo Rouvier company showed nearly 80% of Argentines favor repealing the amnesty laws that benefitted more than a thousand members of the armed forces who took part in the clandestine repression. Political differences in Congress, however, have blocked legislation to repeal the laws. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 02/14/98, 02/19/98; BBC News, The New York Times, 02/24/98; CNN, 03/02/98; Reuter, 02/14/98, 02/23/98, 03/05/98, 03/07/98; Notimex,

02/24/98, 03/06/98, 03/10/98; Spanish news service EFE, 02/17/98, 02/23/98, 03/07/98, 03/10/98,
03/12/98; Clarin (Argentina), 03/06/98, 03/07/98, 03/13/98]

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