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Argentine Governor Suspended While Secret Bank Accounts Investigated

by LADB Staff

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Retired Gen. Antonio Domingo Bussi, governor of Argentina's northwestern province of Tucuman, was suspended April 14 by a provincial legislative committee. During the two-month suspension, the legislature will conduct impeachment hearings, and if Bussi is found guilty, he will be removed from office. During the military dictatorship (1976-1983),

Bussi headed the Tucuman provincial government as commander of the Third Army Corps and was responsible for the disappearance of 600 people. Bussi was charged with human rights abuses after the return to democracy but escaped prosecution through the 1986 amnesty law. When Bussi ran for public office, many people in his poor, semi-tropical province wanted a return to the law-and-order administration Bussi headed in the 1970s. They elected him to the national Congress in 1993 and to the governor's post in 1995 for the Fuerza Republicana provincial party.

Bussi's problems tied to "dirty war" victims

The legal proceedings that led to Bussi's suspension began early this year, when Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon, investigating the fate of Spanish citizens who disappeared in Argentina during the military regime, asked Switzerland for information on safe-deposit boxes held by present or former Argentine military officers. The Swiss office of the public prosecutor found bank accounts in the names of several Argentine officers, including Bussi.

The governor had not included the accounts in his sworn declaration of assets made prior to his inauguration. He first denied that the account existed, then said he forgot to declare it. Bussi's assets of more than US\$1 million were then investigated by civil and military authorities. Human rights advocates say the money could have been stolen from victims of the repression (see NotiSur, 03/13/98).

Tucuman legislators voted in February to ask Bussi to resign, and when he refused, began impeachment proceedings against him. On March 17, the army's Tribunal de Honor gave Bussi a "serious reprimand" for failing to declare the Swiss account and then lying about it.

Although the reprimand did not result in a dishonorable discharge and had no practical repercussions, it was a blow to Bussi's image. In his defense, Bussi said his statements regarding the Swiss accounts were made "as a governor, not as a retired military officer, in a clearly political context," and therefore his actions were not subject to army scrutiny.

Bussi's suspension leaves province deeply divided

The president of the Impeachment Committee of the Tucuman Chamber of Deputies, Malvina Segui, said Bussi was suspended for resorting to subterfuges and omissions to keep his fortune a

secret. Bussi appealed the decision, but the provincial Corte Suprema de Justicia denied the appeal. Although some "hawks" within Bussi's party urged him not to accept the court decision, moderates prevailed and convinced him to leave the governor's office. Bussi's entire Cabinet resigned in solidarity with the governor, as did several other state and local officials. Deputy Governor Raul Topa also accused of participating in the repression will temporarily take Bussi's place, and could become governor if the retired general is convicted.

The general's son, Deputy Ricardo Bussi, said his father would respect the suspension, make it through the impeachment proceedings, and return to his post. "My father is a popular leader who knew how to defend democracy," said Bussi.

Federal prosecutor and legislature run parallel investigations The office of the public prosecutor and the Tucuman Congress are running parallel legal processes. Federal prosecutor Paul Starc has filed charges of illicit enrichment and falsification of public documents, arguing that Bussi could not have accumulated his assets on a monthly salary of US\$2,600. Starc said Bussi has real estate and other assets registered under the names of third parties, that he falsified sale and repurchase operations, and that his total assets were worth more than US\$1 million. In his statement of assets, Bussi declared only one property in Tucuman, another in Buenos Aires, and one account in a local bank.

But the federal prosecutor found eight properties in the name of the Bussi family, along with four vehicles, stocks, accounts in local and foreign banks, rural properties and a residence in Punta del Este, an exclusive resort town in neighboring Uruguay. Meanwhile, the congressional impeachment proceedings began April 16 and must be concluded within the 60-day suspension period. Despite the suspension, removing Bussi from office will be difficult, given the political makeup of the 28-member Impeachment Committee. On April 21, the Tucuman Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) suggested a referendum on whether Bussi should leave office, which it said would prove whether Bussi really has as much popular support as he claims.

Neither FREPASO nor the Union Civica Radical (UCR), the two other opposition parties in Tucuman, appear to back the proposal. Despite the lack of support, the PJ plans to formally introduce the proposal in the multiparty opposition bloc. "Opinions are divided and it will be difficult to reach an agreement," said Antonio Guerrero, one of the backers of the referendum proposal. "Some who oppose a referendum are afraid to confront Bussi." Bussi "is campaigning for his return with the argument that the impeachment effort is a maneuver by those who cannot defeat him at the ballot box," said Guerrero. "The only way to stop him is to defeat him in a referendum."

Former deputy and FREPASO leader Jose Vitar disagrees, saying it would be counterproductive to hold a referendum before the impeachment process has concluded. "It could result in the hypothetical case where the Tribunal finds him guilty, but the referendum shows no support for ousting him from office," said Vitar. "If the trial clearly demonstrates his guilt, however, but pro-Bussi deputies use their numbers and party allegiance to block a condemnation, then a referendum would make sense." Bussi is spending his time covering the province to bolster support, and says he will introduce legislation to allow him to be re-elected.

Meanwhile, in another case involving repression during the dictatorship, on March 20, retired Adm. Emilio Massera refused to answer a court's questions about the disappearance of thousands of people held at the Navy's notorious Escuela de Mecanica de la Armada (ESMA) torture center (see NotiSur, 01/16/98 and 02/13/98). Massera, now in his 70s, was Navy chief at the time of the 1976 military coup.

As a member of the military junta, he led a bloody campaign of kidnap, torture and disappearance against leftist guerrillas and their suspected sympathizers. Massera was tried in 1985 and sentenced to life in prison for 83 counts of murder and hundreds more of kidnap, torture, robbery and extortion. But in 1989 he was freed under a pardon signed by President Carlos Saul Menem. [Sources: Reuters, 03/17/98, 04/13/98; Associated Press, CNN, 04/13/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/14/98; Inter Press Service, 04/14/98, 04/15/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/26/98, 04/08/98, 04/14-16/98; Clarin (Argentina), 03/20/98, 04/13/98, 04/15/98, 04/21-23/98, 04/28/98]

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