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Ex-Argentine Dictator Videla Arrested for Stealing Children During Repression

by LADB Staff

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Former Argentine president Jorge Rafael Videla (1976- 1978) was detained June 9 on charges that he was responsible for kidnapping children born to women who were jailed and "disappeared" during military rule (1976-1983). If convicted, Videla could receive a 25-year sentence. Videla was one of the leaders of the 1976 coup that ousted former president Maria Estela Martinez de Peron (1974- 1976), and he headed the first military junta following the coup. During Argentina's "dirty war," Videla had final authority over the death squads that tortured and murdered as many as 30,000 political opponents, mainly leftists.

In the years of military rule, some children were born in the secret torture centers, including the infamous Escuela Mecanica de la Armada (ESMA). Those babies and other children taken when their parents were detained were given to military couples for a "Christian upbringing."

Now young adults, some still do not know who their parents were nor that they were killed in the repression. After the return to democracy, former President Raul Alfonsin (1983-1989) set a South American precedent by putting the junta leaders on trial. Gen. Videla was convicted in 1985 and sentenced to life in prison for 66 counts of murder, 306 abductions, 97 cases of torture, and 26 robberies. To placate the military, Alfonsin also passed laws protecting the security forces from further prosecution.

In 1990, Videla and all middle-ranking and senior officers were pardoned by President Carlos Saul Menem. The pardons, however, did not cover child stealing or illegal adoptions. Judge's investigation leads to arrest Federal Judge Roberto Marquevich has been investigating whether a systematic plan existed, carried out by the military, to take children born in the clandestine jails and hospitals and give them to military officers and their wives.

On June 9, Marquevich ordered the arrest of the 72-year- old Videla on charges of child kidnapping and falsifying identity documents. Videla was taken into custody at his home in a northern Buenos Aires suburb, then taken to a facility in San Isidro, 20 km north of the capital. Videla is accused of responsibility for the kidnapping of five children, including two children given to former military doctor Norberto Bianco and his wife Susana. The couple fled to Paraguay after democracy was restored. They were later arrested and extradited to Argentina where they pleaded guilty to kidnapping.

Videla could be indicted in other cases of child abduction as well. Marquevich said the arrest was related to "36 to 38 cases" of children who disappeared during military rule. Arrest strikes at impunity Human rights advocates hailed Videla's arrest. "This is the result of more than twenty years of struggling for justice," said opposition Deputy Alfredo Bravo, co-president of the Asamblea

Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, who was jailed and tortured during the dirty war. "Videla and his accomplices in genocide should never have been pardoned." Estela de Carlotto, director of the human rights group Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, said the Abuelas had received 230 declarations involving children of persons detained during the military regime, many of them newborn, who were then turned over to others. Of those cases, 59 children have been found. "We are glad he is in prison, although he should serve time for all of his crimes, not just kidnapping babies," said Hebe Bonafini, president of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo.

Once a week since 1977, the Madres have marched in the Plaza de Mayo in front of the presidential office building in downtown Buenos Aires to demand that authorities find their missing children. The past that will not stay buried For years, Argentines thought the pardons had ended any chance that the junta's atrocities would be punished. Although many Argentines, including President Menem, urge moving beyond the dark past, it remains in the present. In 1995, former navy officer Adolfo Scilingo described his remorse for having participated in "death flights" to dump drugged dissidents out of planes into the Atlantic Ocean. His testimony caused such indignation that armed forces chief Gen. Martin Balza publicly apologized for past excesses of the military.

Statements in January by admitted torturer Alfredo Aztiz sent new shock waves through the country (see NotiSur, 01/16/98 and 02/13/98). In addition, investigations in Europe into the disappearance of Spanish and Italian citizens during the repression in Argentina are underway (see NotiSur, 05/01/98), and the European courts want to question Videla in those investigations. Videla and another leader of the 1976 coup, former Adm. Emilio Massera, have also been called to testify in Argentina as victims' families try to find out what happened to their relatives.

Videla was scheduled to appear in court June 10 regarding the disappearance of two leftist guerrillas in 1976. Roberto Santucho and Benito Urteaga, leaders of the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo, were killed in a confrontation with security forces in 1976. Their families are asking that their bodies, which were reportedly buried at Campo de Mayo military installation north of Buenos Aires, be returned. (Sources: CNN, Notimex, 06/09/98; Spanish news service EFE, 06/09/98, 06/10/98; The New York Times, 06/10/98; Associated Press, 06/09-11/98; Reuters, 06/09/98, 06/11/98; Agence France-Presse, 06/11/98]

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