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LADB Staff

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Argentine Congress Blocks Former General From Taking Seat

by LADB Staff

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Argentina's Congress voted Dec. 1 to block former Gen. Antonio Domingo Bussi from taking the Chamber of Deputies seat he won in the Oct. 24 elections. Bussi is charged with corruption, human rights abuses, and kidnapping babies during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. Most other newly elected deputies were sworn in during the Dec. 1 session and will take office Dec. 10. Bussi was elected a Tucuman national representative two days before he handed the governorship over to his successor, Julio Miranda.

Lawmakers feared that if Bussi were allowed to take his seat in Congress, he would use his legislative immunity to evade criminal prosecution. Following several hours of emotional debate, more than two-thirds of the legislators in the lower house voted to have a committee (Comision de Peticiones, Poderes y Reglamento) of the Chamber of Deputies determine whether Bussi is fit for office. Deputy Amado Juri, the former Partido Justicialista- peronista (PJ) governor of Tucuman who was deposed and jailed by Bussi in 1976, will chair the hearing.

Bussi will not be allowed to assume office until the committee reaches a verdict on his case. "We want to give Bussi the opportunity to defend himself, that same opportunity that he denied his victims," said Buenos Aires Deputy Jesus Rodriguez. The opposition Alianza, whose leader, Fernando de la Rúa, won the October elections and takes over the presidency Dec. 10, has 104 deputies in the lower house. It has strongly opposed Bussi's entering Congress.

Alianza Deputy Alfredo Bravo, a human rights activist, said Bussi was "morally unqualified" to serve as a deputy. Bravo said that during the military dictatorship when Bussi was Tucuman's de facto governor 680 people were disappeared in the province.

Vice president-elect Carlos Alvarez urged deputies to deny Bussi entry to the lower house for not disclosing a Swiss account in his income declaration. And human rights groups came together after the October elections to urge Congress to act against Bussi. Bussi's son Ricardo was the only legislator to speak on the general's behalf.

President Carlos Saul Menem had previously urged PJ legislators to support Bussi, but many joined the Alianza in voting to block him from taking his seat. Far-reaching accusations made against Bussi After Argentina returned to democracy, Bussi, 70, was accused of kidnapping, torture, and other rights violations while he was military ruler of Tucuman, 900 km north of Buenos Aires, during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. But he was covered by the 1987 amnesty laws and pardoned by Menem in 1990.

Bussi was elected governor of Tucuman, the second-poorest province in Argentina, in 1995. But in the third year of his term, a Spanish investigation into abuses against Spanish citizens implicated Bussi. He was suspended for 60 days on April 13, 1998, after a committee found that between 1992 and 1997 Bussi's wife managed Argentine bank accounts worth half a million dollars and an undeclared Swiss account containing US\$120,000. The funds were allegedly stolen from victims of the repression (see NotiSur, 1998-03-13, 1998-05-01).

The inquiry revealed that Bussi had never officially declared the Swiss account. He initially denied the charges, but later confessed. A military court convicted the suspended governor of perjury and reprimanded him, but Bussi's party had the majority in the provincial legislature and prevented his suspension from moving forward to an impeachment.

Bussi is also being investigated by Argentine federal Judge Adolfo Bagnasco regarding babies of political prisoners who were taken from their mothers and given to military officers and their wives during the dictatorship.

Six witnesses testified before Bagnasco that Bussi determined the fate of both the babies born in clandestine prisons and their mothers, most of whom are among the thousands of disappeared. German lawyers Claus Richter and Wolfgang Kaleck came to Argentina last month to question Bussi and other military leaders about the kidnapping, murder, and disappearance of 10 German citizens during the Argentine dictatorship.

Bussi is also among 98 former Argentine officers recently indicted by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon for human rights abuses (see NotiSur, 1999-11-12). Garzon had requested they be investigated for their alleged participation in kidnapping, torture, disappearances, and illicit enrichment during the dictatorship. Last month, Domingo Jerez, a former soldier and taxi driver, testified about a clandestine detention center in Tucuman where Bussi often went to personally torture prisoners or shoot them at point-blank range.

Jerez said he saw Bussi beat two prisoners to death with a club in the detention center. "He asked them things and beat them," Jerez said. In 1976, at the height of the repression against alleged subversion, Jerez was fulfilling his mandatory military service and was assigned to drive a truck that took detainees to the center. He said the clandestine jail operated in an abandoned sugar mill in Caspinchango, in the jungles of Tucuman. It is not among the 340 such facilities previously detected by human rights organizations. Jerez's account was the second testimony of torture and murder allegedly committed by Bussi. The first was from a former police officer who said he saw the retired general shoot prisoners at the edge of common graves. [Sources: Inter Press Service, 10/06/99, 11/23/99; Reuters, 10/29/99, 11/23/99, 11/30/99; Spanish news service EFE, 11/27/99, 11/30/99; Associated Press, Clarin (Argentina), Notimex, 12/01/99; The Buenos Aires Herald, 12/06/99]

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