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## Files Show U.S. Supported Argentine "Dirty War"

by LADB Staff

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US State Department documents, declassified in December 2003, show clearly that former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger gave verbal support to Argentina's military junta, which had been aggressively persecuting suspected dissidents. The documents were obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by the National Security Archive (NSA), an independent Washington-based group that monitors FOIA issues.

Meanwhile, European courts continue to pursue former Latin American military leaders accused of gross human rights violations during the "dirty wars" of the 1970s and 1980s. The NSA filed a FOIA request with the State Department in November 2002, seeking information missing from an earlier release of documents. The newly released documents show that, in October 1976, Kissinger and other high-ranking US officials gave their full support to the Argentine junta and urged them to finish the repression before the US Congress cut military aid.

Congress was expected to consider the following January suspending military aid to the dictatorship and blocking a US\$8 million credit from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) because of the human rights violations. One transcript covers a meeting between Kissinger and Argentina's foreign minister, Adm. Cesar Augusto Guzzetti, on Oct. 7, 1976, at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, during the UN General Assembly sessions. Also at the meeting were Argentina's ambassador to the US, Arnaldo Musich, and its UN ambassador, Carlos Ortiz de Rosas.

The transcript provides the first documentary evidence that the administration of US President Gerald Ford approved of the junta's harsh tactics. The Argentine military had begun going after leftists in 1975, before it took power in a coup the following year. From the time the military took over, the junta insisted it had the support of the US, but proof was lacking until now. After the return to civilian rule in 1983, many ranking military officers were tried on charges of abduction, torture, and execution of suspected leftist opponents of the regime. They were convicted and imprisoned in 1985 but pardoned in 1989 (see NotiSur, 1989-10-24) by then President Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999).

A truth commission, headed by writer Ernesto Sabato, investigated the crimes of the dictatorship in 1984 and found that more than 9,000 people had been assassinated or disappeared, although subsequent investigations put the figure at nearly 16,000. Human rights organizations and the families of the victims insist the number is closer to 30,000. An equal number survived detention and torture in illegal jails, and more than a half million people were forced into exile.

By the time of the conversation between Kissinger and Guzzetti, the widespread murder and disappearances had received worldwide condemnation. In the transcript of the Oct. 7 meeting, Kissinger said to Guzzetti, "Look, our basic attitude is that we would like you to succeed. I have an old-fashioned view that friends ought to be supported. What is not understood in the United

States is that you have a civil war. We read about human rights problems but not the context. The quicker you succeed the better....The human rights problem is a growing one. Your Ambassador can apprise you. We want a stable situation. We won't cause you unnecessary difficulties. If you can finish before Congress gets back, the better. Whatever freedoms you could restore would help."

Guzzetti assured Kissinger the campaign against the leftists would conclude by the end of 1976. "The terrorist organizations have been dismantled," he said. "If this direction continues, by the end of the year the danger will have been set aside."

One day earlier in Washington, acting secretary of state Charles W. Robinson said to Guzzetti that "Argentina is now facing a kind of subversive civil war. During their initial period the situation may seem to call for measures that are not acceptable in the long term." The real question, he said, was knowing how long to continue the tough measures, and he noted that "the Foreign Minister had indicated that they might be required for another three or four months."

Robinson told Guzzetti that "the United States is an idealistic and moral country and its citizens have great difficulty in comprehending the kinds of problems faced by Argentina today. There is a tendency to apply our moral standards abroad and Argentina must understand the reaction of Congress with regard to loans and military assistance. The American people, right or wrong, have the perception that today there exists in Argentina a pattern of gross violations of human rights."

### *Guzzetti jubilant at US support*

After Guzzetti returned from Washington, Robert Hill, the US ambassador in Buenos Aires, complained to Washington that he could hardly push human rights if the foreign minister was given a different message by the US secretary of state. In September 1976, Hill had begun pressing the Argentine military on human rights issues, amid a dramatic increase in the number of victims being disappeared, killed, and tortured, including at six US citizens.

The junta dismissed Hill's efforts, according to previously declassified cables written by the ambassador, and alluded to an understanding with high ranking US officials "that the USG's overriding concern was not human rights but rather that GOA 'get it over quickly.'"

Now Hill wrote that Guzzetti told him that "[t]he Secretary...had urged Argentina 'to be careful' and had said that if the terrorist problem was over by December or January, he (the Secretary) believed serious problems could be avoided in the US...." Wrote Hill, "Guzzetti went to US fully expecting to hear some strong, firm, direct warning of his govt's human rights practices. Rather than that, he has returned in a state of jubilation. Convinced that there is no real problem with the USG over this issue."

Harry Shlaudeman, the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, who had attended Guzzetti's meetings with both Kissinger and Robinson, replied to Hill, saying said that Guzzetti "heard only what he wanted to hear." The two new documents were not among the 4,667 documents released in August 2002 by the State Department's Argentina Declassification Project. Those

documents, which included diplomatic cables showing that the Argentine military believed it had Kissinger's approval, made front-page news in Argentina and provided documentation on military decision-making that is being used in court cases related to the repression. For some of the victims' families, they gave the first available evidence of what had happened to their loved ones.

One document released in 2002 was a State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) analysis written just a week before Guzzetti's trip to the US. The report says, "There is no doubt that most, if not all, of the right-wing terrorists are police or military personnel who act with the knowledge and/or direction of high-level security and administration officials....They continue to act with an impunity that belies government denials of complicity....the excesses are likely to continue until: the security forces have reduced the subversive threat to what they consider to be an acceptable level; and [President Jorge Rafael] Videla feels sufficiently secure and strong in the presidency to assert his authority over free-lancing subordinates."

Circulating at the time of Guzzetti's meetings in the US was a report by the State Department's Argentina desk officer Fernando Rondon regarding an Oct. 4, 1976, interview with Gwenda Loken Lopez, a US victim of Argentine torture. That document was also released in 2002. Congress had pressured the State Department to persuade the Argentines to free the woman, who had been detained and tortured for handing out communist leaflets one of thousands arrested by the military in 1976.

Back in the US, Loken Lopez testified about her treatment by Argentine security forces: "[They] started using the picana [an electric prod]. Then they tied me down and threw water on me....They questioned me but it was more, 'just give it to her. There. There. There.' In genital area....They said they'd fix me so I couldn't have children."

### *Kissinger denies supporting human rights abuse*

Kissinger has repeatedly denied ever condoning human rights abuses. These documents are certain to add to the questions that have increased in recent years as more evidence has emerged on his connection to human rights violations around the world including in Chile, Indonesia, and Bangladesh (see NotiSur, 2001-10-05). Kissinger has been linked to Operacion Condor, the network through which the military regimes of the Southern Cone countries collaborated during the 1970s and 1980s to wipe out the leftist opposition (see NotiSur, 2001-06-01).

"This document is a devastating indictment of Kissinger's policy toward Latin America," said John Dinges, an assistant professor at Columbia Journalism School and author of *The Condor Years*, due out in February. "Kissinger actually encourages human-rights violations in full consciousness of what was going on."

Carlos Osorio, director of the NSA's Argentina Documentation Project, said these documents prove that there was an official line of condemnation of the dictatorship in the US, but another line that supported it. "The military interpreted perfectly what they had heard," said Osorio. "This is final, definitive evidence that Kissinger gave a green light to Argentine generals."

## *President Kirchner creates "memory archive"*

On Dec. 16, Argentine President Nestor Kirchner announced the creation of the Archivo Nacional de la Memoria, a national archive to gather all documentation regarding the crimes of the military dictatorship. The victims "were valiant heroes who wanted to deflect the repressive, genocidal authoritarian will of a leadership that seized control of the country between 1975 and 1983," said the president. The decree creating the archive, which will be under the Secretaria de Derechos Humanos of the Ministry of Justice, obliges all official entities, including the armed forces and state security, to provide all documentation that they have regarding crimes committed during the dictatorship.

As military rule was ending in November 1983, the leaders ordered their subordinates to destroy all documentation that referred to the "fight against subversion," the euphemism that covered the practice of state terrorism. Nevertheless, human rights organizations and the justice system later found reports in various military headquarters and police stations regarding cases of detained and disappeared people (see NotiSur, 2001-07-13).

"We have to know what happened in each detention center....The Argentines have to know the truth and what happened during that tragic period," said Kirchner to the families of the disappeared. He said Argentines must decide whether they will continue "living in a society of doublespeak and hypocrisy" or move forward "decisively in the construction of our truth, of our reality, of our justice, in the destruction of impunity."

## *Germany issues arrest order for ex-junta leaders*

On Dec. 3, German authorities issued an international detention order for former dictator Videla, 78 years old, former Adm. Emilio Massera, 78, and former Gen. Carlos Guillermo Suarez Mason, 79, for the assassination of two German citizens theology and sociology student Elisabeth Kaesemann and Munich Technical University student Klaus Zieschank.

The three accused, "using the existing chain of command, unleashed regular simultaneous actions that led to the assassination of the victims," said the German investigators. Kaesemann, who was 29 years old at the time, was assassinated along with other detainees on the night of May 25, 1977, near Monte Grande, a province of Buenos Aires, according to the German prosecutor.

Zieschank, then 24 years old, was strangled in May 1976 on an order of Suarez Mason. His body was later thrown into the sea from a helicopter. The Kaesemann family lawyer Roland Beckert expressed his satisfaction with the decision by the German justice department. "This is a very pleasant surprise," he said. "Nevertheless, politically there is little chance that the accused will be extradited. I estimate that first the processes will have to be carried out in Argentina."

"We hope that the government of President Nestor Kirchner and the Argentine tribunals will cooperate with German justice, thus confirming Argentina's respect for international law and human rights," said Esteban Cuya, coordinator of the German organization of families of victims.

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