

3-31-2006

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### Recommended Citation

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## 30 Years Since Military Junta Celebrated

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: 2006-03-31

On March 24, the government and people of Argentina marked 30 years since the military coup ended democracy in the country for seven years and left thousands dead and missing. The military junta that ruled from 1976 to 1983 seized power from Maria Estela Martinez de Peron (1974-1976), purged the country's left through murder, torture, and forced disappearance, and implemented some 1,800 laws, removing any advances accomplished earlier in pro-labor legislation. Argentine President Nestor Kirchner marked the anniversary with promises that "never again" would such a period come to pass.

### *"Never again!"*

The country somberly recalled the March 24, 1976, coup that toppled the constitutional government of Maria Estela Martinez de Peron and ushered in a "dirty war" against dissidents. Peron was the vice president and widow of Juan Domingo Peron (1946-1955, 1973-1974). She took the presidency after her husband died. During a crisis of hyperinflation and anarchic violence between the divided wings of the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) and other groups, military officers led by Gen. Jorge Videla overthrew Martinez de Peron and began a nationalistic purge of the country's dissident forces. The junta did not fall until its disastrous failure in a war with Britain over the Malvinas or Falkland Islands brought it into total disrepute.

Among a long litany of crimes, officers stole children from detainees in torture centers and illegally arranged for their adoptions by allies of the regime (see NotiSur, 1998-06-12). Official estimates say the regime killed 13,000 people, though human rights groups place the number closer to 30,000. "Not one step back" was the motto of those who commemorated the coup with a new national holiday, rallies, rock concerts, and a tour for dignitaries of the horror chambers in the dictatorship's biggest torture center.

Applauded by his Cabinet and the gray-haired Madres de la Plaza de Mayo wearing the trademark white handkerchiefs of their long human rights struggle, left-leaning President Kirchner condemned what he called systematic state terror during the dirty war. The Madres said that the current government was an ally in their cause when they staged their final Resistance March earlier this year (see NotiSur, 2006-02-10). Kirchner dealt a blistering public challenge to pardons of coup leaders, saying in a speech at a military college that they should receive court scrutiny.

After the dictatorship fell in 1983, many military officers were tried on charges of abduction, torture, and execution of suspected opponents of the regime. They were imprisoned in 1985 and later pardoned, along with leftist guerrillas, in 1990 by President Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999) who called it a move toward national reconciliation.

"Maybe it's time to unravel the web of impunity woven by those pardons. Let the justice system quickly determine their validity or their unconstitutionality," Kirchner said, denouncing junta leaders led by Videla a general he said was not worthy of his military title. Last year, Kirchner successfully appealed to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to overturn 1980s-era amnesty laws shielding dozens of former officers from human rights prosecutions (see NotiSur, 2005-06-24).

Many of the junta's surviving leaders and other officers have in recent years faced a gauntlet of judicial investigation and house arrests on charges of kidnapping children belonging to mothers who "disappeared" during the military's rule. An exception to the amnesties allowed those crimes to be prosecuted.

Recent reports have stated that prosecutions have been more swift and effective in the capital than in interior states. With the amnesty laws recently repealed and Kirchner moving to reopen old files, there is renewed hope for justice more than two decades after the dictatorship's demise.

Victims and their families are calling for cases to be reopened before more years pass. "We can't have vengeance, but we must have justice," said Justino Correa, a former victim, who recounted on television how he was picked up by security forces and whisked away for torture. Thousands ushered in the first national holiday to mark the coup by singing sentimental protest songs and watching newsreel clips of armored cars and junta leaders projected on large screens.

In a giant nighttime slide show, some 3,600 photographs of the victims were projected one per second onto the white stone flanks of a towering Buenos Aires spire known as the Obelisco. There was one brief flare-up of violence when more than 100 leftist youths, some with wooden clubs, threw paint bombs and rocks at police guarding the home of Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz, a former junta-era economy minister. Riot police scattered the masked protesters with a brief burst of tear gas after they shattered windows and fled.

The Todos Noticias network reported seven police were slightly injured. The weekend before, hundreds of protesters threw rotten tomatoes at the apartment building where Videla is under house arrest.

### *New documents show Kissinger "encouraging" junta*

A Washington-based research group said it had obtained a declassified transcript of a staff meeting in which former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger expressed support for Argentina's military regime soon after the coup. The National Security Archive (NSA), a Washington foreign-policy study group that has periodically released declassified documents covering the dictatorship in Argentina, said the documents showed Kissinger convened a weekly staff meeting two days after the March 24, 1976, coup in Argentina. The NSA did not say how or when it obtained the transcript, made public a day ahead of the coup's 30th anniversary. Kissinger Associates, Kissinger's lobbying firm in New York, did not respond to telephone calls from the Associated Press, and an emailed request for comment was not immediately answered. Kissinger has in the past denied condoning abuses.

The NSA's transcript shows Kissinger was informed in the meeting by William D. Rogers, then assistant secretary of state for Latin America, that if the Argentine military regime succeeded, it would make a "considerable effort to involve the US particularly in the financial field." The transcript indicates that Kissinger responded, "Yes, but that is in our interest." Rogers, according to the transcript, advised that "we ought not at this moment rush out and embrace this new regime." The document follows with Rogers saying, "I think also we've got to expect a fair amount of repression, probably a good deal of blood, in Argentina before too long." Kissinger, after further discussion about the new government, is quoted as stating, "Whatever chance they have, they will need a little encouragement from us."

### *Domestic spying scandal closes Navy offices, removes officers*

In addition to solemn ceremonies and prosecutions dating back to the regime, the abuses of the era continue to have echoes in contemporary politics. Revelations of domestic spying by the Navy roiled the national scene the week before the anniversary. Argentina's naval chief confirmed on March 21 that he had ordered all in-country intelligence operations by the Navy to be temporarily suspended after a domestic-spying scandal broke out at a remote Patagonian military base.

Defense Minister Nilda Garre ordered the suspension by Adm. Jorge Godoy after local media reported allegations of illicit spying on officials, politicians, and local journalists from the Admiral Zar naval air base in Chubut province. Godoy said inspectors would be sent to 11 naval intelligence centers to determine whether there were any other suspicions of espionage extending beyond the Admiral Zar base, 590 km south of Buenos Aires. "All [intelligence] offices have been closed, and we are sending naval inspectors along with Defense Ministry representatives to determine the function of each one of these offices," Godoy said on radio after the scandal erupted.

Local media reported a judge was investigating accusations that the Chubut governor as well as Defense Minister Garre and others were spied upon, but officials had no independent report on those claims. The motive for the spying was still unclear.

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