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LADB Staff

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## Dirty War Police Investigator Sentenced for Life

by LADB Staff

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A former police investigator was sentenced to life in prison on Sept. 19 in connection with the disappearance of six people during Argentina's "dirty war" against political dissent. The conviction of Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz, 77, was the second of its kind since Argentina's Supreme Court in June 2005 annulled a pair of 1980s amnesty laws blocking prosecution of crimes committed during the nation's 1976-1983 dictatorship (see NotiSur, 2005-06-24).

### *Former collaborator with the "worst of them all"*

"They are going to convict me," Etchecolatz said in his final statement to the federal court. "They have no shame condemning an old, ailing man." Prosecutors described Etchecolatz as a former top collaborator of Ramon Camps, the late Buenos Aires province police chief who was allied with the military when the dictatorship began with a 1976 coup. Buenos Aires news media characterized Camps' 20-month rule over clandestine detention centers as "the worst of them all." Nearly 13,000 people are officially listed as killed or missing as a result of what prosecutors described as the dictatorship's systematic crackdown on dissent, known as the dirty war. Human rights groups say the toll is closer to 30,000.

Authorities say dissidents, labor leaders, intellectuals, and other opponents of the regime were illegally detained and never heard from again. Reports said many were tortured and then executed. More than 100 witnesses were called during the nearly two-month trial that began June 20. Activists lauded the verdict, including members of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, who have been campaigning for information about sons and daughters who disappeared during the dictatorship.

On Aug. 4, former police officer Julio Simon was sentenced to 25 years in prison for human rights abuses in connection with the 1978 disappearance of a married couple during the dictatorship. Nine junta leaders were convicted and imprisoned in 1985 on charges of abduction, torture, and execution, but they were pardoned in 1990 by then-President Carlos Menem (1989-1999).

Lower-ranking officers also received pardons. Etchecolatz is among dozens of former police and state-security agents facing prosecution after amnesty laws were overturned last year.

### *Dirty war witness disappears*

Police aided by dogs searched areas of Argentina on Sept. 25 for a missing 77-year-old witness whose gripping testimony of torture helped convict Etchecolatz. In a heightening drama, federal police units across the country were seeking tips into the disappearance of Jorge Julio Lopez, who went missing on the eve of the Sept. 19 conviction of Etchecolatz. Lopez was reported missing after his son went to pick him up to attend the final trial statements and found that his father was not

home. The day after Lopez's disappearance, Etchecolatz was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in the disappearance of six people during the dirty war.

President Nestor Kirchner expressed his "tremendous worry" for the man's well-being. "They know that there is an Argentine who was central in the allegations in the sentencing of the perpetrator of genocide Etchecolatz. [It is] the friend, the companero Lopez, who we are looking for everywhere today, almost with desperation," said Kirchner on Sept. 26. "Some people don't want the truth and want to plant fear," said Kirchner, under whose administration 900 trials against former police and military figures have been reactivated. Family members say it wasn't normal for Lopez to vanish and police had no immediate explanation for his disappearance.

"The return of Lopez is fundamental for democracy," said Buenos Aires provincial Gov. Felipe Sola, who added investigators were trying to determine whether Lopez "could have been kidnapped to intimidate future witnesses or prevent future testimony" in other cases. "There are fears he may have been abducted by people connected with the former military government because of his involvement in the trial and as a warning to potential witnesses in similar future trials," the Madres de Plaza de Mayo said in a statement. Authorities offered a US\$64,000 reward for information leading to Lopez.

During the trial, Lopez had identified Etchecolatz as one of the men who tortured him when he was detained at La Plata police station in 1976. He testified in chilling detail about how he was abducted in October 1976, soon after the military seized power, and how he was tortured.

Amnesty International (AI) urged authorities to spare no effort to find Lopez. "Since the return of civilian government in 1983, lawyers and relatives of those who 'disappeared' while the country was under military rule and members of nongovernmental organizations investigating those 'disappearances' have been threatened, harassed, and attacked," Amnesty said.

## *Videla pardon revoked*

Judicial decisions to revoke old amnesties for human rights abusers continued in September, with a federal court judge ruling Sept. 5 that a presidential pardon of a former junta leader was unconstitutional, the state news agency Telam said. Judge Norberto Oyarbide's ruling was another legal setback for 81-year-old Jorge Rafael Videla, who is under house arrest as authorities investigate alleged crimes he committed during the dictatorship. Videla led the junta during what human rights groups say was the harshest period of the dictatorship. He retired in 1981 and was succeeded by other junta leaders. The nine former junta leaders who were convicted and imprisoned in 1985 but were pardoned by Menem included Videla. Legal experts said Videla would appeal the ruling. The case will next go to Argentina's Supreme Court.

On Sept. 4, Oyarbide also declared invalid the 1990 pardons of former economy minister Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz and former interior minister Albano Harguindeguy in connection with an investigation of two dictatorship-era abductions. Both men were part of Videla's junta cabinet when he led the March 1976 coup that toppled the constitutional president, Maria Estela Martinez de Peron (1974-1976). Menem also pardoned Martinez de Hoz and Harguindeguy. Prosecutors have

said the three men are wanted for questioning in the abduction and alleged extortion attempts against textile magnate Federico Gutheim and his son, Miguel, who were held between 1976 and 1977.

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