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Ex-Argentine President Peron Reburied

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The body of former Argentine President Juan Domingo Peron (1945-1955, 1973-1974) was exhumed from a crowded urban cemetery in October and ceremoniously moved to a 19-hectare mausoleum complex outside Buenos Aires in what had been planned as a demonstration of the strength and unity of the party that bears Peron's name, the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ).

But the Oct. 17 ceremony saw no appearances by President Nestor Kirchner or the two ex-presidents who had committed to speak there after it devolved into rioting, rock-throwing, and shooting. The conflict between union groups and different Peronist factions resulted in over 50 injuries. The incident threatened to bring down the country's top union leader and became a political liability for President Kirchner as he prepared for a potential re-election bid in October 2007.

Nation's top labor chief accused of allowing violence

The most damaged political figure after the violence of Oct. 17 was teamster Hugo Moyano, head of the Confederacion General de Trabajadores (CGT), the nation's largest umbrella union organization. He had been in charge of organizing the reburial ceremony in the farming community of San Vicente and of security arrangements for the event. News video captured a member of his union who worked as a chauffeur for Moyano's son shouting, "Shoot them! Shoot them!" and firing four shots from a handgun during the melee.

The accusations that Moyano had allowed circumstances that led to the factional conflict led a group of his opponents both within and outside the CGT to seek his resignation and call for elections to name a replacement. Violence marred the lavish ceremony to rebury former strongman Peron, as rival factions hurled rocks at one another and riot police dispersed them with rubber bullets and tear gas. The fighting between club-wielding groups of men on the fringes of a mostly peaceful crowd of thousands resulted in at least 50 injuries.

The violence was reportedly touched off by members of rival labor factions of the Peronist party who became angry at being refused entry to the ceremony. However, authorities had no immediate confirmation on the motives for the battles, and labor leaders denounced the violence shortly afterward. Riot police tightly ringed the flag-draped coffin topped by a military cap and saber, as it neared the new US$1.1 million mausoleum built to house Peron's remains on his former estate in San Vicente, a farming community 45 km southwest of the capital.

Peron's many burials

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It was the third burial for Peron since his death in 1974 at age 78. His supporters felt he deserved a more dignified resting place than the crowded, urban Chacarita cemetery where grave robbers broke in and stole his hands in 1987 (see NotiSur, 1987-07-07). Some supporters hope one day to put the remains of Peron's wife Eva by his side in the gleaming, cement-and-marble crypt.

Peron was elected president three times and radically reshaped Argentina by redirecting farm wealth to poor urban workers. He and his glamorous blond wife Eva, known as Evita, were Argentina's dominant political figures in the 20th century and still inspire passionate responses from Argentines. During his years as undisputed political leader of Argentina, Peron commanded wide popular and union support, including the backing of the poor "shirtless ones" (descamisados.)

The ceremony came 11 hours after Peron's remains were removed from the crypt in the cemetery where they had lain for most of the past 32 years. Throngs of people fought to touch his coffin as bugles sounded and pallbearers loaded it onto a motorized caravan. As Peron's body was put into the mausoleum, hundreds of supporters clapped, raised arms in a "V-for-victory" salute, and yelled "Viva! Long live Peron!"

Before Peron's body arrived, the rival labor groups appeared to be competing for good viewing positions for the ceremony. Scuffles escalated into barrages of rocks, flying bottles, sticks and bricks, and the rival bands drifted to one of the compound's entrances. Scores of police, firing tear gas and rubber bullets, restored a tense calm for nearly three hours until a second bout of violence erupted just after Peron's coffin arrived. "This was supposed to be a celebration, a historic day," said one woman fleeing with her family. "Instead it is a great shame."

One man left in a car with windows shattered by rocks. Earlier on Oct. 17, hundreds of labor activists waved large photographs of the Perons, who in life cultivated an enormous working-class following. The workers waved banners reading "Peron, Immortal! Evita, Immortal!" as Peron's coffin was taken to a midday tribute at a union hall. "We are paying homage to our Peronist party, to the political party of our grandfathers and our fathers!" said 24-year-old Daniel Ferreri.

An authoritarian leader who also had enemies, Peron nationalized railroads and other industries to bankroll state programs for the working classes. The young Evita became a national icon, and, after her death from cancer at age 33 in 1952, her body lay in state in Congress for weeks as hundreds of thousands of mourners thronged to her coffin for the open viewing. When military leaders overthrew Peron in 1955, they were apparently so worried about a death cult that they secretly moved Evita's body to an unmarked grave in Italy. In 1971 it was delivered to Peron's home in exile in Spain.

Peron returned to Argentina soon after and ruled briefly until his death. He was succeeded by his third wife, Isabela (1974-1976), less commonly known as Maria Estela Martinez de Peron. She brought Evita's body to rest by Peron's in the presidential residence in Buenos Aires. But after she
was ousted in a 1976 coup, the military quietly dispatched both bodies to their families' respective crypts. Evita's relatives have opposed moving her coffin from her family's tomb in the Recoleta cemetery in downtown Buenos Aires to rest beside her husband a move urged by some Peronist leaders.

Dissident union members seek new election

The emblematic moment of the conflict at the San Vicente ceremony was the video of Emilio Quiroz, a CGT member and employee of secretary-general Moyano's son Pablo, firing a handgun. Quiroz turned himself in to authorities and remained jailed pending a trial for attempted homicide. He had recently obtained a license to own a firearm, although he did not have the license necessary to carry the weapon loaded in public. It was unclear whether Quiroz hit anyone, with police reporting no injuries from gunshots while Buenos Aires newspaper Clarin reported that sources at the San Vicente Hospital said they treated four people with bullet wounds.

Moyano came under a storm of scrutiny from the press and critics after Quiroz's connection to him emerged, and there were reports that Quiroz had enjoyed the confidence of the Moyano family. Moyano angrily threatened to end an Oct. 19 press conference if reporters continued to barrage him with questions about the chauffeur and the larger scuffle between teamsters and construction union members. "What do I know about why he came in armed, what are you asking me for?" was one of his responses to press questions.

Moyano's CGT and the group Confederacion de las 62 Organizaciones Justicialistas were in charge of the event and took heavy criticism. Local police claimed the groups in charge had asked police not to set up security inside the mausoleum, allowing the riot to occur, a claim that union representatives denied. Moyano's rivals, known commonly as "los gordos," seized the incident as a chance to unseat him.

Leaders like food service union chief Luis Barrionuevo, state employee union leader Andres Rodriguez, and builder Gerardo Martinez joined Jose Luis Lingeri, the number two of the CGT who was injured in the scuffle, in seeking Moyano's resignation and new elections to replace him. "There are only two possibilities left: that [Moyano] resign and Lingeri steps in as transitional leader, or, in the case that he does not want to go, that we members of the directorial council resign to force him to call a new congress," said an unnamed member of the "gordos" group to Clarin on Oct. 19. Moyano still maintains the support of the members of Movimiento de Trabajadores de Argentina (MTA) who backed him for his leadership position with the CGT.

Moyano took a prominent national role as a leader of the movement against the economic and labor policies of former presidents Carlos Saul Menem (1989-1999), Fernando de la Rua (1999-2001) and Eduardo Duhalde (2002-2003). Moyano and fellow labor leaders organized large strikes against austerity and market-liberalization policies encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF),

By the end of November, Moyano had successfully held on to his leadership position, with his support from the Kirchner administration apparently still intact and no sign that he would resign. Critics were still pressing for him to step down, although their moment appeared to have passed for the time being. On Nov. 3, 104 union groups announced their "unconditional" support for Moyano at a meeting of his supporters.

On Nov. 4, Moyano said, "I will not resign." Juan Pablo Medina, leader of a construction union in the city of La Plata that clashed with Moyano's partisans on Oct. 17, still called for Moyano's resignation and said workers in the CGT "should elect their leaders democratically."

**Kirchner's hopes for triumphant ceremony backfire**

The ceremonies and unrest underscored how the movement that bears Peron's name has suffered deep fissures since his death. Former presidents Menem and Duhalde, rivals of President Kirchner, Peronists all, said they would not take part, even though they had previously agreed to participate in the ceremony, according to reports in local media. Kirchner also canceled plans to attend after the violence broke out.

Kirchner's purpose with the reburial had apparently been to show himself off as the new, indisputable leader of a revived Peronist party. But his effort to show off the power of the Kirchnerist wing of the PJ in the lead-up to the 2007 presidential race may have backfired badly. Kirchner said in an Oct. 18 speech that, with the prior day's violence, his opponents "seek to take aim against the president, to put brakes on change, they want to disrupt the spirit of the Argentines."

Moyano has been an ally of the Kirchner administration, and press outlets criticized Kirchner's Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez for meeting with the CGT chief on Oct. 24. But the government refused to repudiate Moyano in the following weeks and Kirchner appeared with him at a Nov. 10 event. Kirchner has experienced continued popularity levels around 70% and midterm elections consolidated his political strength late last year (see NotiSur, 2005-11-04). Yet he faced his first electoral reverse in three years as president at the end of October, when a gubernatorial initiative he openly supported in the northeastern province of Misiones failed by a wide margin.

Misiones Gov. Carlos Rovira, one of the first to back Kirchner's presidential election campaign in 2002, held a plebiscite seeking authority to run for unlimited terms as governor, which Kirchner endorsed. The failure of the effort to change the provincial constitution by a vote of 56.6% against
and 43.4% in favor had opposition figures optimistic about their chances to beat Kirchner if he runs next year. But the "no" vote may have had more to do with opposition by Catholic and evangelical churches in Misiones to Rovira’s "arrogance" in seeking unlimited terms as governor than with Kirchner.

Nonetheless, Kirchner has antagonized church leaders critical of his administration and they may choose to support his opposition in 2007. DNA test purportedly shows woman not Peron's daughter Peron’s exhumation and reburial also served to resolve a legal conflict regarding the late president's paternity. A privately commissioned DNA test found no relation between Juan Peron and a 72-year-old woman claiming to be his daughter, a lawyer for Peron's former wife said Nov. 14. Isabela Peron commissioned the test in response to claims by Martha Holgado that she is the daughter of Juan Peron, who she said had an affair with her mother.

Isabela Peron's lawyer, Humberto Linares Fontaine, said on Argentine television that the test did not show any biological link between Peron and Holgado. But Holgado told the Associated Press she was awaiting the results of a court-ordered DNA test. Her lawyer, Santos Cifuentes, added that any independent testing "isn't valid until it can be compared with the analysis ordered by the judge." Under court instructions, forensic experts extracted DNA samples from Peron's remains on Oct. 13 ahead of the reburial at the new mausoleum. Judge Mirta Illundain, who is handling Holgado's paternity case, has not said when the court-ordered DNA test results would be made public.

**Human rights investigation of ex-president**

Isabela Peron Yet Isabela Peron's apparent legal triumph in the case of Peron's patrimony was overshadowed by judicial investigations into her presidency. An investigator focusing on abuses during Argentina's dirty war against dissidents began examining Isabela's tenure, officials said Nov. 2. The development marks the first time that the she has been mentioned by investigators in connection with the violence by the military junta that ousted her in 1976. Investigating Judge Raul Acosta's expansion of the probe to include Isabela Peron was confirmed by Sergio Marinelli, government minister for Mendoza state, in an interview with Radio 10.

Gustavo Gioldar, who commands the federal police in the Mendoza state city of San Rafael, said the investigating judge is seeking information "about the actions of security forces in the period before the military regime." He said the judge has ordered police to determine Isabela Peron's whereabouts as well as the whereabouts of several former Cabinet members. Kidnappings and killings of suspected leftists before the 1976 coup that toppled her presidency are considered to be the precursor to the dirty war waged by the subsequent military regime. Thousands of dissidents were killed or disappeared before civilian rule was restored in 1983.

Isabela Peron has remained in exile in Spain since 1981. Mendoza Gov. Julio Cobo called the order "a bit exaggerated" and suggested the judge was trying to blame the abuses of the military on
Isabela Peron. A lawyer for Isabela Peron, Atilio Neira, told local television, "You cannot make an accusation against a president 30 years later." A local newspaper reported that Isabela Peron signed three decrees that allegedly led to acts of state terrorism including the disappearance of at least one person in San Rafael.

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