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Operation Condor-Era Mass Graves Found in Paraguay

by LADB Staff

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Twenty years after the end of the long dictatorship of Paraguayan Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), the task of disclosure and verification carried out by relatives of victims of the military regime is beginning to bear fruit. The October 2008 appearance of a new archive of the repressive forces was followed in recent weeks by the discovery of two clandestine mass graves.

The Ministerio del Interior and Verdad y Justicia, a nongovernmental human rights agency, said the graves, which were not near each other, could contain remains of some 150 people murdered or disappeared in the final days of that dismal period. "We have strong evidence that those two tombs contain Argentine and Uruguayan victims, as well as Paraguayans, who were killed under Operation Condor (see NotiSur, 2001-06-01), the coordinated repression by the military regimes of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay," said lawyer and human rights activist Martin Almada, a survivor of Stroessner's prisons. "

Although the victims' remains in the graves might be minimal," said Almada, "the discovery is very significant not only because it will bring a measure of peace to relatives of the murdered and disappeared but also because it was made thanks to testimony from former members of the repressive forces. This shows that, for the first time in so many years, the pact of silence has been broken that guaranteed impunity to the military, former police, and civilians who were part of the assassination squads during those years of terror and bloodshed."

In 1992, Almada found the Archivos del Terror, tons of documentation that spelled out in great detail the agreements under which those five South American dictatorships implemented Operation Condor (see NotiSur, 2000-07-07). The information that led to finding the sites of the clandestine graves "was given confidentially by former low-ranking agents who were carrying a weight on their consciences that they could not bear," said Catholic Bishop Mario Melanio Medina, head of Verdad y Justicia.

Medina also revealed that this was the first time the government had allowed access to and excavations in areas that belonged, or still belong, to military and police units. Discovery of the first grave was confirmed July 23 when investigators found the bones of between two and four people that showed clear signs of having been shot. Interior Minister Rafael Filizzola said the remains could be those of political prisoners from the jail at Emboscada, 45 km north of the capital Asuncion.

The victims could have been killed in the prison dungeons and their bodies taken to the capital to be buried in what was the garden of the Guardia de Seguridad, now the Agrupacion Especializada of the Policia Nacional.

President Lugo's commitment to human rights questioned

President Fernando Lugo and Vice President Federico Franco went to the scene. Both promised thorough investigations. We will go and excavate "wherever it is necessary, without looking at who the land belonged to or belongs to, where we might find evidence or proof so that, finally, Paraguayans have the justice they demand and deserve," said Lugo. "We want an open democratic society, and this discovery is fundamental. We cannot forget that in societies that have had experiences similar to ours, such as Argentina, events such as those we are observing today have helped consolidate their processes and, because of that, those responsible were tried."

Despite his good intentions, Lugo is being questioned by human rights groups. To find the truth, at whatever cost, was one of his campaign promises, recalled Federico Tatter, son of a disappeared person and member of the organization of victims' relatives Agrupacion de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos y Asesinados por Razones Politicas de Paraguay (FADDAPY). "We recognize that his proposal to fight corruption ran headlong into major obstacles from the moment he was unable to modify the composition of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the most corrupt branch of government, but something could have been done regarding human rights," said Tatter.

Tatter's opinion is shared by various social groups, alarmed at the impunity with which, on May 1, Sabino Montanaro, former interior minister during the dictatorship, unexpectedly returned to the country after 20 years as a fugitive. Montanaro was responsible for the dictatorship's repressive apparatus between 1966 and 1989. First held in a special jail, he was soon taken to his home, thanks to a controversial CSJ decision granting him house arrest.

The highest judicial body continues to be run by judges aligned with Stroessner's Asociacion Nacional Republicano (ANR, Partido Colorado), and its members have ruled that they have permanent tenure, making it impossible to remove them. "Montanaro's arrival exposes one of the principal shortcomings of the government, which has yet to define a human rights policy with a vision of recovering historic memory, ending impunity inherited from the dictatorship, and overcoming the lack of an integral reparations policy," said FADDAPY in a public statement.

"It took the arrival in the country of the civilian responsible for repression during more than 20 years [Montanaro] to again unleash a wave of citizen indignation and trigger a belated and lukewarm response from the presidency in outlining some commitment by Fernando Lugo that, beginning May 2, nine months after taking office, human rights with a vision of historic memory would be considered a national cause."

FADDAPY is calling on Lugo to make the struggle for human rights government policy and to create a secretariat specifically for the issue, with the mission of "watching over all archives from the repression that have been recovered, continue the search for the disappeared, and set a national policy of integral reparations to transform and humanize the state and Paraguayan society." On Aug. 31, FADDAPY and Amnesty International-Paraguay observed International Day of the Disappeared to pay homage to Paraguay's victims of state terrorism. In a joint statement, they called on the government to ratify the UN's International Convention for the Protection of All Persons

from Enforced Disappearance and asked that the property used by the Agrupacion Especializada be declared a permanent park of historic memory and honor to the victims of state terrorism.

Remains found in Pastor Coronel's Cemetery

The second discovery occurred Aug. 12 when a common grave filled with human remains was uncovered on property of the department of San Pedro, 295 km north of Asuncion. As if to allay any doubt that the remains belong to victims of the dictatorship, they were found in a place locals call "Pastor Coronel Cementerio kue," which in Guarani an official language along with Spanish means Pastor Coronel's Cemetery.

Coronel headed the Servicio de Investigaciones of the Policia Nacional for 25 years, and various researchers of recent history describe him as "the most feared of the repressors." Investigators also found this site thanks to information from two former low-ranking officers under Coronel who broke the pact of military-police silence. The bodies of no fewer than 100 people murdered during the dictatorship could be buried in the grave at San Pedro. This was the third time Minister Filizzola authorized civilian anthropologists to have access to a military property. The first authorization was on Oct. 31, 2008, when a group of provincial governors and human rights activists were permitted to check out a basement in the Ministry of the Interior installation exactly under what had been Sabino Montanaro's office.

At the end of a long tunnel that was partially filled with water, they found a torture chamber, objects used in degrading treatment of political prisoners of the regime, and thousands of pages of documentation complementary to the Archivos del Terror found by Almada. These small advances, small but the first, come at a critical time for Lugo's plans regarding the CSJ, which, while granting moderate house arrest to the principal civilian responsible for repression under the dictatorship, has also hobbled all investigations of economic crimes or crimes against humanity in which people from Stroessner's repressive apparatus are implicated.

A majority of CSJ judges, who belong to the Partido Colorado, ruled that their positions are permanently tenured, that they are judges for life, although tenure ended for Justice Wildo Rienzi when he retired. The Senate, which appoints judges, chose from a slate of three nominees the only one openly rejected by Lugo.

The president vetoed the appointment. "If the Senate denies the president's constitutional veto power, we will face an unpredictable institutional problem," said Filizzola. That is the hope of Pedro Fadul, former presidential candidate and leader of the rightist Partido Patria Querida (PPQ), who said, "Perhaps people are getting bored with this man's [Lugo's] discourse and won't let him complete his five-year term." Fadul unabashedly added, "I believe the number of us demanding his resignation is growing."

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