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Struggle Continues in Paraguay to Hold Dictatorship-era Repressors Accountable

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The discovery of human remains in an Asunción, Paraguay, police barracks that served as a detention center during the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), the death of a repressor who had evaded legal action since the fall of the dictatorship, and the initiation of a campaign to investigate crimes of the past and try those responsible left President Fernando Lugo's progressive administration in an uncomfortable position and renewed longstanding denunciations of alleged interference by the US State Department and the Pentagon in Paraguay's internal affairs. Unlike other South American countries, where investigation of the past is promoted by the governments in cooperation with civil-society humanitarian organizations, in Paraguay those tasks are on hold, and victims' relatives are the only ones pushing for the search for the truth.

On Feb. 15, the discovery of a skull and arm and leg bones from a person interred long ago in the central garden of the police's Agrupación Especializada headquarters shook relatives of victims of the dictatorship. To date, the remains of 22 people have been found at the site. The center for anti-riot forces, site of the regime's principal detention and torture facility, is on the southern outskirts of Asunción and is now used to house drug dealers and other dangerous criminals.

Former detainees call for end to repression

Days earlier, the Colectivo de Ex Detenidas Políticas Carmen Soler (CCS)—an organization of women who are former political detainees and who survived the worst abuses—had reported that security forces "continue being directed by known agents of the dictatorship" and that "they order and carry out the repression against campesinos who are demanding the lands that were taken from them illegally."

The collective is named for Carmen Soler, a teacher and poet accused of attempting to impose communism in Paraguay. Her father, mother, and three brothers were detained and tortured, and Carmen spent several periods in jail and years in exile. She died in 1986 in Argentina, before seeing Stroessner ousted.

The CCS specifically named Antonio Campos Alum, the former director of the Ministerio de Interior's now defunct Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Técnicos (known as La Técnica) and Antonio Gamarra, director of the Fuerzas de Operaciones de Policías Especializados (FOPE). Two days later, Campos Alum died at his secret hideaway.

The CCS presented leaders of the three branches of government with the document, "To prosecute the dictatorship's repressors is to stop the repression of the Paraguayan people." Although, by tying the past to the present, the title implicitly criticized the Lugo administration, the text was more explicit, saying, "Our campaign means denouncing, investigating, trying, and punishing those responsible for state terrorism during the dictatorship and for the persecution of campesinos fighting for agrarian reform now."
"Many former repressors continue fulfilling official functions in the police and military security forces," said Teresita Asilvera, a CCS leader. "This impunity for crimes during the dictatorship is what enables repression of social protest today." She was referring to police actions against the campesinos demanding lands occupied by soy farmers in the eastern department of Alto Paraná (NotiCen, Feb. 17, 2012).

That was not the only criticism of the president. In announcing the latest discovery of human remains in the Agrupación Especializada, the director of the Comisión Verdad y Justicia (CVJ) Rogelio Goiburú said, "By not using the US$150,000 budget item for a genetic study of the bones that were found, the government is responsible for preventing the relatives from knowing whose bones they are."

Days later, the CCS said, "The 696 repressors identified by the CVJ and still enjoying impunity are the Praetorian Guard of a society that we want to change, in the same way that our disappeared companions wanted to change it and the landless campesinos today want to change it."

Activists call on president to fulfill campaign promises

Neither the CCS women nor the activists of the CVJ—a group created in 2009 by Bishop Mario Melanio Medina (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2009), a former companion of Lugo's when both belonged to the Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya (CEP) and had to deal with the rightist Catholic clergy—are enemies of the government. However, both organizations challenge the president, a former Catholic bishop who left religious life to enter politics, for his failure to fulfill his principal campaign promises: to put into practice an ambitious agrarian-reform program and investigate human rights violations during the 35-year dictatorship.

The groups know that the progressive Lugo administration is unable to fulfill its promises because it lacks political power and is confronted by a Congress dominated by the rightist opposition and a judiciary in the hands of conservative sectors linked to the dictatorship (NotiSur, Feb. 27, 2009, and Oct. 7, 2011). But they also know that by merely calling attention to the situation, they can make some progress toward their objectives.

Denunciations of alleged US interference in internal Paraguayan affairs are always a backdrop to these criticisms. And the critics often mention the 2009 police-training agreement signed by Lugo and Colombia's then President Álvaro Uribe (NotiSur, Oct. 1, 2010), under which Colombian special forces instruct Paraguayan police in the war on terrorism, understood as the war on drug trafficking.

The basis for the CCS complaints go back to the late 1950s, when US Col. Robert K. Thierry, a Korean War veteran, organized and instructed the first agents of La Técnica. The CCS bases its allegations on a May 16, 2004, article in the opposition Asunción daily ABC Color, in which the figure of the now deceased Campos Alum appears for the first time. He is described as a key figure in setting up Operación Condor, the coordinated repression implemented by the dictatorships of Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay (NotiSur, June 1, 2001).

By identifying La Técnica as "the most important and clearest historical demonstration of US interference," the CCS document compares that organization, created to "confront the communist danger," with the Secretaría de Prevención e Investigación del Terrorismo (SEPRINTE), the agency to which the Colombian instructors are assigned. "We say that the police and military
persecution against opponents during the time of La Técnica was transformed into the present political persecution against the most militant organizations, which SEPRINTE defines as terrorist," says the CCS text presented to the president, leaders of Congress, and the judiciary.

**Past and present US presence in Paraguay**

Without presenting proof, the CCS said, "The fact that until recently SEPRINTE operated openly in the US Embassy and today operates in an agency related to the US government gives unprecedented seriousness to our complaint." Finally, the text says that now, in the northeastern department of Concepción on the border with Brazil, "US and Colombian armed forces are instructing 100 FOPE agents in repression techniques that are being applied against latifundio challengers."

The 2009 CVJ report said that 10% of the adult population passed through the prisons during the dictatorship and that all of them "were subjected to the worst tortures." Asilvera recalls that, in 1982, testifying at a hearing in Brooklyn, New York, Robert White, US ambassador to Asunción from 1977 to 1979, said that torture was an integral component of repression in Paraguay. "It's at the heart of the system that enables the Stroessner dictatorship to maintain itself in power," said White, revealing some behind-the-scenes aspects of US interference in the internal Paraguayan life.

The former diplomat's statements were made at the US trial of Paraguayan repressor Américo Norberto Peña Irala—who had fled to the US—accused of kidnapping and murdering the adolescent Joélito Filártiga in Asunción in 1976, an incident made into the 1991 film One Man's War, starring Anthony Hopkins.

Years later, on May 8, 2010, J. Patrice McSherry made the same point in an article published in the Argentine daily Página 12. McSherry is a political science professor at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York. Quoting Robert White, McSherry tied the US to the continentwide repression and former secretary of state Henry Kissinger to the creation of Operación Condor.

In her article Kissinger lo hizo (Kissinger did it), the Long Island professor refers to a document declassified in 2000 by the administration of former US President Bill Clinton and published in The New York Times on March 6, 2001. It deals with a cable from White to then secretary of state Cyrus Vance in which White gives details of a conversation with Gen. Alejandro Fretes Dávalos, head of the Paraguayan armed forces. Among other confidences that could prove the influence of US diplomacy in the country, Fretes Dávalos told White how agents of the six Operación Condor countries made use of a US facility in the Panama Canal Zone, using "an encrypted system within the US telecommunications net[work]...to coordinate intelligence information."

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