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MERCOSUR Unveils New Trove of Files on South American Dictatorships

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Human rights violations committed by South American dictatorships during a period of four decades—from the 1954 coup d’état that brought Gen. Alfredo Stroessner to power in Paraguay to the peaceful departure of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1990—are part of the complex history shared by the countries of the Southern Cone. Military regimes in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, acting on their own or in coordination with their counterparts in other countries, carried out a policy of terror. Respected historians say this policy was designed and promoted by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and had its roots in Washington (NotiSur, Sept. 18, 1998, and Oct. 5, 2001), where the National Security Doctrine was said to have been planned.

The idea was to impose neoliberal economic policies on all the countries in the region, regardless of the will of the people. The dictatorships left behind a dramatic toll that included tens of thousands of people murdered, tortured, and disappeared; some 5,000 children treated as the spoils of war and "given away," their identities erased; and around one million people in exile (NotiSur, July 7, 2000).

As Argentine analyst Javier Borelli wrote in the Buenos Aires newspaper Tiempo, these regimes also managed to strangle their countries, "leaving them in impossible debt, turning over state assets to transnational interests, eliminating social and work-related gains, banning political and union activity, and destroying industries and, along with them, jobs. But they did not manage to destroy people’s culture or make them forget."

Even under the most adverse conditions, during those years of dictatorships some people and organizations took on the dangerous task of gathering information, driven by the urge to obtain justice and ensure that people did not forget, Borelli wrote. Finally, with the end of the last military regime, the democratic governments began taking over the demands—intensely in the case of in Argentina, more reluctantly in Chile.

New guide to help researchers of abuses

Now, as the justice system continues to do its work, with varying degrees of difficulty depending on the country, the Instituto de Políticas Públicas en Derechos Humanos (IPPDH) of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) has launched a guide to reference materials that compile information on crimes committed by the military regimes, "so that justice can act, so that memory can move forward." That was how MERCOSUR authorities put it when they announced, on Aug. 2, that the plan to make this information public had finally come to fruition.

The guide, which for now is available online only to attorneys defending victims of the dictatorships and to human rights organizations, includes 115 archives from 71 institutions from the six countries. This will make it possible to look into cross-border intelligence coordination, meetings of the high military commands, and the organization of courses, exercises, and conferences held from the beginning of the 1960s until now.
It will also provide a window into the creation and development of Operación Cóndor, the coordinated strategy of repression carried out by the Southern Cone dictatorships (NotiSur, June 1, 2001, and Sept. 4, 2009). Today Operación Cóndor is more than simply a suspicion, after documents declassified in the US exposed Kissinger’s real role in the sinister operation.

"There are millions of pages and rolls of microfilm, and while they may not contain direct, convincing evidence of a particular crime, they do show how the repressive regimes were structured. The role of the archives will thus be critical when it comes to reconstructing systematic patterns," said IPPDH executive secretary and human rights lawyer Víctor Abramovich. The IPPDH was created in 2009 by the Consejo of MERCOSUR to help coordinate human rights policies in the region.

The new guide "is still a work in progress," Abramovich said, adding that it is not enough simply to have a description of the files; rather, they need to be set up so they can be more easily searched and organized. "We’re talking about an impressive volume of documents," he said.

The trove of archived information will make it possible "to get very close to the truth," Abramovich said. But, he added, the clandestine system of state terrorism, which included kidnappings, detentions, and deaths, "makes it difficult to get at the truth." In some countries, he said, the regime had one formal command structure and another parallel one, which complicates efforts to reconstruct events.

In general, the dictators constantly rotated the dirty work among military commanders and soldiers, "so that nobody would be exempted from the genocide, which meant that nobody would be tempted someday to break the pact of silence necessary to guarantee eternal impunity. Everyone kidnapped, everyone tortured, everyone killed, everyone made people disappear or participated in appropriating and changing a child’s identity. I don’t know whether they thought it out or not, but today it is often difficult to pinpoint who was responsible for this or that act."

At first glance, the creation of the IPPDH and of the historical archive might suggest that MERCOSUR has made human rights policy part of the political agenda of integration, that there is not just an economic MERCOSUR but also a human rights MERCOSUR, a democratic answer to what was once Operación Cóndor. The head of Brazil's Secretaria de Dereitos Humanos Maria do Rosário Nunes rejected that idea. "This is not about a desire for retribution but about the need to find justice through truth, to activate memory," she said.

Abramovich, Nunes, and Uruguayan unionist and human rights activist Deputy Luis Puig stressed the importance of the MERCOSUR initiative and said the customs union is not just a customs union but a regional political community. The three agreed that these countries share a common past and a political identity, and can work together on such issues as how to help victims, address human rights violations, and construct a collective memory and pass that on to other generations that did not go through this chapter in history.

For example, Argentina, more than any other Operación Cóndor country, saw a systematic policy to take the children of the disappeared and change their identities. Thus, when the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo started crying out for their stolen grandchildren, psychologists started to understand that they had patients with symptoms they had not recognized before.

"Nothing about victims of that aberrant practice had appeared in the professional literature," said Argentine psychologist Sonia Bergman. As these pathologies began to appear, psychologists
developed treatment approaches they were then able to share with their counterparts in neighboring countries.

**Two cases may be helped in short term**

Human rights organizations believe that, in the short term, the massive volume of documents organized in the guide will be particularly helpful in two complicated legal cases. One has been brought in Argentina and involves investigations into events related to Operación Cóndor; the other has to do with cases in Brazil related to the genocide of indigenous peoples.

The trial in Buenos Aires, which began March 5, implicates the six dictatorships that implemented the coordinated strategy of repression and combines parts of various cases underway from 2008 to 2012 (NotiSur, April 12, 2013). It includes the cases of 106 victims—Uruguayans, Paraguayans, Chileans, and Bolivians—who were killed or disappeared in Argentina with the participation of police or members of the military of their countries of origin, along with three Argentine citizens who died in Brazil. Judges and lawyers estimate that it will take at least two years to analyze the tens of thousands of documents and interview some 450 witnesses who will be giving testimony on the 25 accused.

In the specific case of the Brazilian indigenous communities, the discovery process turned up a report that remained hidden for nearly 46 years and was thought to have been destroyed in a fire shortly after being turned over to the military in 1967 by prosecutor Jader de Figueiredo Correia. The 7,000-page document describes cases of torture, land grabs, rapes, poisonings, sterilizations, and genocide perpetrated against dozens of tribes from 1940 to 1960 by landholders and high-level officials from the state Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (SPI).

Although the report has not been released, some experts have had access to it. "The Figueiredo report makes gruesome reading, but in one way, nothing has changed: when it comes to the murder of Indians, impunity reigns," said Stephen Corry, director of the human rights organization Survival International. "Gunmen routinely kill tribespeople in the knowledge that there’s little risk of being brought to justice—one of the assassins responsible for shooting … tribal leaders have been jailed for their crimes. It’s hard not to suspect that racism and greed are at the root of Brazil’s failure to defend its indigenous citizens’ lives."

Today the British activist is hopeful that finally, with a new wind blowing in South America, assailants hired to kill Indians will see that the era of impunity is coming to an end.

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