Rash of Neo-Nazi Hate Crimes in Argentina’s Mar del Plata

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The Argentine resort city of Mar del Plata has seen a flurry of racial, ethnic or gender-oriented attacks by neo-Nazi groups. In February alone—the height of the southern summer—there were eight such incidents in the seaside community, which was teeming at the time with tourists.

Authorities have reported more than 30 attacks since October, when neo-Nazis used sticks and stones to attack 4,000 women activists who had congregated in Mar del Plata from across the country for the 30th Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres, an annual gathering of women. The primary targets of these attacks are homosexuals, prostitutes, human rights defenders and Bolivian immigrants.

The hate groups often make death threats. But it wasn’t until early in the morning of Feb. 14, during an attack in a downtown bar called Nevermind, a gathering point for gays, lesbians and transvestites, that they brandished firearms. Participants in the aggression—among them recognized members of ultra-right Catholic groups, including one made up of teenage girls—were seen by dozens of witnesses and recorded on the establishment’s security cameras.

The Asociación Marplatense de Derechos a la Igualdad (AMADI), a local rights group headed by the owner of the bar, and the Asamblea por una Sociedad sin Fascismo (ASOFA), an anti-fascist umbrella organization, submitted the security camera recordings to police and judicial authorities. Days later, they complained publicly that only one person had been arrested for the attack. “But he wasn’t detained for xenophobia or racism, or for belonging to an armed gang that threatens to kill people because of their sexual orientation. They arrested him for hitting a police officer and being intoxicated, and shortly after set him free. On whose orders?” the organizations asked.

“The people responsible for the wave of attacks in February… are protected by municipal, provincial and national authorities,” AMADI and ASOFA went on to say. “They feel untouchable. And this speaks to the new political situation in the country now that the conservative alliance Cambiemos, headed by the businessman President Mauricio Macri, controls the government. The leaders of the Nazi groups are Cambiemos activists. They feel protected by Macri, by [Mar del Plata] Mayor Carlos Arroyo and by the provincial governor, María Eugenia Vidal, all representatives of the same party.”

Dangerous discourse

Incidents reported elsewhere in the country seem to back the theory that the resurgence of the neo-Nazi groups is a consequence of the right’s victories on Oct. 25 in the Argentine general election, and on Nov. 22, when Macri beat presidential candidate Daniel Scioli of the now opposition Frente para la Victoria (FPV) in a runoff. Macri officially took office Dec. 10, replacing Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015) (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2015).

On Jan. 16, in the northern province of Jujuy—which is led by Governor Gerardo Morales, a member of Cambiemos—authorities jailed indigenous activist Milagro Sala. Besides being the leader of an important social movement, Sala was also elected last year as a deputy for PARLASUR, a regional legislative body representing the five full members of the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR): Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
On March 5, in the capital Buenos Aires, an inauguration ceremony in the headquarters of Nuevo Encuentro (NE), a party allied with the previous government, was attacked with firearms. A day later, in Mar del Plata, a branch of La Cámpora, a pro-Kirchner youth faction, was fired on, in this case by an organization calling itself Bandera Negra (Black Flag), the city’s most active neo-Nazi group. Two week after that, a group of prostitutes in the western city of Mendoza was attacked with chains by a number of people wearing hoods to hide their identities. And on April 9, in the eastern city of Paraná, the headquarters of the Partido Comunista, along with the houses of some Jewish residents, were painted with swastikas and threatening messages.

In Buenos Aires, NE leader and former deputy Martín Sabbatella met with the minister of security, Patricia Bullrich, to demand an investigation into the attack on his party’s headquarters. “The people in the top tier of the executive branch are responsible because of the violent language they use when talking about the previous government’s affiliates and policies. [That kind of language] leads to institutional and political violence,” he said. Speaking out against the attack on La Cámpora in Mar del Plata, Eduardo Jozami, also a former deputy, had a similar reaction. “It’s the government, most notably with the rhetoric coming from Macri himself and his ministers, that is helping create a political climate that seriously denigrates the political process,” he said.

The minister of economy, Alfonso Prat-Gay, has been particularly divisive, often using offensive terms when talking about the opposition. He described political opponents, for example, as “the militant fat” and has repeatedly said that, “Macri is cleaning up the filth left behind [by the previous government].” In reference to the tens of thousands of public-sector workers laid off in recent months (NotiSur, March 25, 2016), Prat-Gay said the new government is “cleaning house, tossing all the garbage we inherited into the street.”

Troubling track record

Violent acts by ultra-conservative Catholic groups aren’t new in Mar del Plata. But there has been an evident resurgence of such incidents following the October elections. Rights groups blame Arroyo, the recently elected mayor, and point to his background to suggest he has an ideological affiliation with these violent groups and with racist Nazism in particular.

One of Arroyo’s principal campaign associates, for example, was Carlos Pampillón, leader of the Foro Nacional Patriótico (FONAPA), Mar del Plata’s oldest Nazi organization. In 2013, Arroyo was let go as director of a secondary school for displaying a swastika and other Nazi emblems in his office and for not speaking out against the desecration of tombs in the city’s Jewish cemetery. And in 2011, as a member of the Concejo Deliberante, the city council, he cast the sole nay vote against a proposal—put forth at the behest of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo rights group—to remove from the building a portrait of Pedro Giachino, a deceased ship captain accused of being responsible for crimes against humanity during Argentina’s last civil-military dictatorship (1976-1983). Giachino was born in Mar del Plata and died during the Argentine invasion in 1982 of the Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands).

More recently, in December, the Centro de Residentes Bolivianos de Mar del Plata, a Bolivian immigrant association, publicly accused the mayor of using “denigrating [language] to refer to immigrants in general and Bolivians in particular.” The area hosts a large Bolivian community, particularly in Batán, an agricultural area outside Mar del Plata that produces many of the vegetables consumed in the resort city. Arroyo also drew criticism in February when he dismissed
suggestions he do more to stop the wave of neo-Nazi attacks. “These are police matters,” he said. “My job is to administer, not to investigate and judge.”

Philosopher Santiago Kovadloff, a leading figure in Argentina’s Jewish community, and interestingly enough, one of President Macri’s top advisers, told the Mar del Plata daily La Capital—but without mentioning either Macri or Arroyo by name—that “it is worrisome and frightening, the indifference and callousness of those who have the power to impede the development of these groups but instead look the other way.”

**Rock-show recruiting**

Among the more revealing incidents carried out by the neo-Nazi movement in Mar del Plata were the destruction of a monument honoring victims of the last dictatorship, and an attack carried out on the Centro de Residentes Bolivianos. The monument stood at the entrance of the city’s naval base, which once served as a prison camp and torture center. In the case of the Bolivian community center, vandals spray-painted, on the front of the building, the words “Fuera Bolivia de Salta” (Bolivians, get out of Salta) in reference to the northern province that borders Bolivia and is home to a large community of Bolivians of Aymara Indian descent.

The ASOFA, one of the groups that complained so vocally about the Nevermind attack in February, says that in addition to the Foro Nacional Patriótico and Bandera Negra, there are four other neo-Nazi organizations active in Mar del Plata: Memoria Completa, La Giachino, La Banda del Rusito, and Rosas Rojas, an adolescent gang headed by Pampillón’s daughter. The young woman reportedly practices martial arts and is said to have been involved in attacks—using chains and brass knuckles—on other teenagers in the high school she attends.

ASOFA believes the groups coordinate with each other and with likeminded organizations around the country. “All of these groups have the habit of meeting in public plazas and recruiting new members in neighborhood athletic centers, in rock concerts and, first and foremost, in middle-class high schools,” according to a document released by ASOFA. One of the instruments reportedly used to lure in adolescents is the rock band Six Million More, an obvious allusion to Nazi Germany’s Jewish victims. The band is part of a musical genre called Rock Against Communism (RAC) that surfaced in the late 1970s in the shadow of the skinhead movement in Great Britain.

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