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Argentina Riled by Case of Missing Activist

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Since Aug. 1, Argentina has been reliving the most appalling drama in its recent history: the forced disappearance of people, a practice so systematized under the civil-military dictatorship of 1976-1983 that upwards of 30,000 went missing. This time around, there is just a single case, a young artisan named Santiago Maldonado, but the response by today's democratic state resembles the practices four decades ago of the worst regime in the country's 200 years of independence ([NotiSur, Sept. 16, 2016](#)).

Maldonado disappeared on a cold winter's day in the Patagonian province of Chubut (1,900 km southeast of the capital Buenos Aires), where members of a Mapuche indigenous community in Cushamen organized a highway blockade to demand the release of Facundo Jones Huala, their lonko (political and spiritual chief). Jones Huala, who was born in Argentina, had been arrested five weeks earlier in Vuelta del Río, Chubut, at the behest of Chilean authorities. The neighboring country is seeking his extradition so that he can be tried for arson of an occupied structure, illegal possession of homemade weapons, and immigration violations. If convicted, the Argentine lonko could be imprisoned for up to 18 years.

Maldonado was with the group when they were stopped by the Gendarmería, a militarized security force that, according to witnesses, hauled the young artisan off. The government of President Mauricio Macri defends the conduct of the security force and insists it had nothing to do with Maldonado's disappearance. It accuses the Mapuches, furthermore, of belonging to an "armed anarchist-Trotskyist" organization—the Resistencia Ancestral Mapuche (Ancestral Mapuche Resistance, RAM)—and rejects repeated demands and complaints filed by the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and humanitarian groups such as Amnesty International (IT).

All around the world, in all languages, leading newspapers are posing the same question that Argentines have painted on the walls of their cities, shared on social media, and chanted in numerous street demonstrations: "Where is Santiago Maldonado?"

The government, nevertheless, continues to push the idea that the Mapuches have become an internal enemy that must be eliminated.

"The RAM is an organization with anarchist-Trotskyist roots that, through terrorism, looks to create an independent state in the middle of Patagonia," Security Minister Patricia Bullrich said before Congress.

Bullrich and the justice minister, Germán Garavano, blame the Mapuches for 70 alleged acts of terrorism, although the only incident about which they offer any details is the Aug. 28 stoning of a McDonald's restaurant in Córdoba, 700 km northwest of the capital. And in a "secret" radiogram sent Aug. 23 to the Gendarmería but published in full detail by the pro-government dailies *La Nación* and *Clarín*, Bullrich signaled a "red alert" and ordered beefed up security for a number of public sites in Buenos Aires. The list includes the presidential palace, Casa Rosada; the various

ministry headquarters; the Catholic Church's Catedral Metropolitana; and the Plaza de Mayo, where family members of the disappeared gathered during the dictatorship to demand the whereabouts of their loved ones.

Age-old antagonisms

The arrest of Jones Huala, and the confrontations between indigenous communities and state security forces, are all part of a long-simmering conflict over territory the Mapuches claim as their own ([NotiSur, Oct. 25, 2013](#)). The problem dates back to before Argentina even gained independence. It begins, in fact, with the arrival in the Americas of the Spanish conquistadors, who in their lust for riches, believed there were temples in Patagonia made of precious metals and stones.

In the wake of Maldonado's disappearance, a number of venues and publications have turned new attention to that history. In one of several reports that the London-based BBC has dedicated to the topic, Claudio Millacura Salas, a Mapuche expert and professor at the Universidad de Chile, explained how in both Chile and Argentina, "the Mapuche people were violently expelled and their lands occupied." He also recalled that children who spoke Mapudungun (the indigenous language of the Mapuches) were punished and taken to concentration camps. "Mapuches who respond violently do so because they were subjected to violence first," the professor said.

The Mapuche people, with a population of roughly 1.7 million, 80% of whom live in Chile, were one of the few indigenous groups that survived the Spanish conquest. But in Argentina, they were devastated by the Army in the so-called Conquest of the Desert (1878-1885), a war against indigenous peoples in which soldiers were given money and promotions as a reward for collecting the ears of dead natives.

Foreign landowners

In a Sept. 1 story for BBC Mundo, the British news outlet's Spanish-language service, correspondent Daniel Pardo offered a description of Vuelta del Río, where Jones Huala was arrested. "If it weren't for the fences separating the lots, this rugged landscape of yellow (because of the native grass), green (from the pine trees), white (from the snow) would seem to be ownerless. But owners there are," he wrote.

Pardo was referring, among others, to the two most emblematic landowners in this area: the Italian textile company Benetton and the British citizen Joe Lewis. The former rose to global prominence with the launch of its successful "United Colors of Benetton" campaign against discrimination and featuring models of different races and ethnicities. The latter is a personal friend of Macri's who sometimes hosts the president and his family during vacations.

In total, Benetton's holdings in Patagonia measure some 900,000 hectares (9,000 sq km), about the size of Puerto Rico, BBC Mundo noted, or several times the size of Luxemburg, as The Guardian, also a British publication, pointed out in an Aug. 8 article. In his BBC Mundo piece, Pardo said he tried to visit the property—where Benetton has some 6,000 cows, 40,000 sheep, 20,000 ha of pine forest, and 4,000 ha planted with oats, barley, and alfalfa—but was denied permission for "security reasons." And on Sept. 30, the company issued a statement saying it is "revising its investment plans because the lack of legal security makes its operations in Argentina unworkable." It was at a protest on those same lands that Maldonado was seen for the last time.

Soy and lithium

The situation in Patagonia is no exception. Research done by AI and cited in a Sept. 17 article in *La Nación* suggests that across the country, there are nearly 225 conflicts involving indigenous groups, and that most have to do with territorial issues. The organization also claims that about 20 of these cases included violent interventions by security forces that resulted in deaths, injuries and even disappearances beyond that of Maldonado.

These conflicts have grown, according to AI, due to an increase in mining activity, land sales to foreigners, and the expansion of farmland (primarily soybean plantations), all of which violate the territorial rights of indigenous groups. "Their rights to recognition and territory, as established in Article 75 of the Constitution and Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, are coming into conflict with the interests of the provincial governments, the state, and private parties," the *La Nación* article explains.

AI has found that since 2013, the number of hectares planted with genetically modified soy has nearly doubled, from 12 million to 22 million ([NotiSur, April 11, 2014](#), and [July 1, 2016](#)). There are also more than 800 mining endeavors now, up from just 40 in 2000. "It's no coincidence that a large portion of the conflicts that resulted in violence have taken place in the northern provinces of Salta and Jujuy, which have the largest reserves of lithium, which is being extracted in increasing amounts," the article reads.

With regards to the sale of farmland to foreign owners, a report by the Registro Nacional de Tierras Rurales (National Registry of Rural Lands) indicated that as of 2015, 16 million ha (6% of all rural land in Argentina) was in foreign hands. To put this process in perspective, AI noted that 16 million ha is double the amount of land being claimed by indigenous communities.

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