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Argentina: Incidents, Statements Following La Tablada Attack

by John Neagle

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According to President Raul Alfonsin's administration, the Jan. 23 attack on the La Tablada military base was led by Enrique Haroldo Gorriaran Merlo. The 47-year-old Gorriaran Merlo was second in command of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) in the 1970s. The government claims the ERP and other guerrilla groups were responsible for the deaths of 688 people in attacks on military and police posts, kidnappings and robberies. In response, the Argentine military arrested, and tortured or killed thousands of leftist or subversive suspects. An estimated 9,000 died after being arrested.

Feb. 1: In a communique published in the Uruguayan daily La Republica, a group calling itself the People's Resistance Front (FRP) took responsibility for the attack on La Tablada. It said some of its members came from a legal political party called All for the Fatherland Movement. Founders of the Movement included Gorriaran Merlo, and other former People's Revolutionary Army members. The communique said the action had been intended to head off a plot by dissidents within the army to mount a coup against Alfonsin's government, and that government troops had executed "various comrades" after they had surrendered. The FRP pledged to "continue the fight." Next, the communique said the attackers had committed planning errors, result of the "urgency" of the action.

Feb. 6: In an article describing generalized reactions to the attack on La Tablada, the New York Times (02/10/89) cites Simon Lazaara, a deputy of the Unified Socialist Party, and vice president of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights: "This has served to revive the worst ghosts from our past." Lazaara said the attack has raised fears that extreme leftist groups will seek vengeance on the army, which in turn might produce a repressive reaction from the military and the government. An unidentified group fired on an air force base in Mendoza, near the border with Chile. According to an official statement there were no casualties sustained in an hour of shooting before the attackers fled.

Feb. 13: According to an Army spokesperson, soldiers repelled an attack by an unidentified group of armed men on the Third Army Command barracks in Rio Cuarto, 450 miles northeast of Buenos Aires. The spokesperson said, "We presume it was a left-wing group, although it has not been positively identified." One soldier was injured.

Feb. 14: At a press conference in Washington after a meeting with Vice President Dan Quayle, Argentine Foreign Minister Dante Caputo said that terrorism is threatening democracy in his country. He added that the Alfonsin administration intends to defend democracy with all its strength. Caputo said that the major topic of conversation with Quayle was the terrorist threat to democracy. He told reporters that President Bush had sent a letter to Alfonsin which focused on the terrorist threat. Next, the minister stated that Bush and Alfonsin share the conviction that the only response to terrorism is the force of law. According to Caputo, poverty in Latin America also constitutes a threat to democracy, alongside the threat from the extreme right and the extreme left who "do not believe in democracy." Caputo said that some of the participants in the attack on the La Tablada military base had previously resided in Nicaragua. He added that he had discussed the attack with Quayle.

Feb. 15: Uruguayan Interior Minister Antonio Marchesano said that the judiciary is studying the possibility of launching an investigation to determine whether members of the FRP are present in Montevideo. The minister's statement occurred hours after the FRP issued another communique published by La Republica requesting

that President Raul Alfonsin investigate the events of La Tablada, and their consequences. Director of the daily newspaper, La Republica, Ferofia Fasano, said two women and a man pertaining to the FRP delivered the communique to La Republica journalists in Montevideo after driving them in a pickup truck to an unknown location. (Basic data from New York Times, 02/10/89; Reuters, 02/13/89; AP, 02/14/89; AFP, 02/15/89)

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