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Argentine Government Responds To Looting, Social Unrest: Summary Of Developments, May 31-june 5

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On the evening of May 28, riots and looting of supermarkets and other retail establishments broke out in Argentina, shortly after President Raul Alfonsin announced new austerity measures calling for higher taxes, exchange controls and spending cuts. In the next two days, riots had spread to Buenos Aires and several other cities. Alfonsin declared a 30-day state of siege, which the national congress approved. Several government officials, including Interior Minister Juan Carlos Pugliese, accused leftist groups of having "agitated" and "organized" looters. According to the conservative Center for a New Majority, real wages are now worth 35% of what they were in December 1983, when Alfonsin took office to end a seven-year military dictatorship. May 31: After a meeting with President Raul Alfonsin, President-elect Carlos Menem said the current government would remain in office until Dec. 10. "I don't want to influence the will of the president," he told reporters. "We are willing to take over when the situation demands it." The Argentine national congress approved tax hikes on agro-exports and unutilized land; the sale of state-run radio and television stations; and, reduced subsidies to industry in the provinces. June 1: The government announced several emergency measures including a 117% increase in the minimum wage to 8,700 australs per month (\$45 dollars) effective Thursday, distribution of food to the poor, and the establishment of soup kitchens. Officials said the food situation could worsen quickly as wholesalers announced they would not immediately resume deliveries to stores, either out of fear of more looting or because they have nothing to deliver. The austral continued its devaluation against the dollar, sliding in black market trading to 230-1, or 24% less than the rate of 175-1 set two days ago by the Central Bank. Foreign exchange houses refused to sell dollars at the official price. Government employees in several provinces threatened to strike for higher pay, bakers in Buenos Aires refused to sell bread at the official price, and stores continued to mark up products in the face of inflation running at about 70% a month. Police arrested three top leaders of the small leftist Workers Party on orders from a judge who accused the party of spurring food riots that killed at least 14 people during the week. The three, detained at Government House in downtown Buenos Aires, were Jorge Altamira, Workers Party president and presidential candidate in the May 14 election; Juan C. Capurro, legal representative; and Octavio Camera. They had arrived to meet with Interior Ministry officials to seek the release of party members arrested during the rioting. In statements to reporters before being taken to jail, Altamira denied any connection between the party and the disturbances and said any government claims of a link amounted to "ideological persecution." Federal Judge Gerardo Larrambebere of suburban Moreno ordered the arrests as well as the search and closing of all Workers Party offices in the metropolitan area. The judge said his order was based on "prima facie evidence showing that party activists encouraged in large measure" the rioting. The court's jurisdiction includes San Miguel and Moreno, scenes of widespread looting and destruction May 29 and 30. Six people died in San Miguel and three in Moreno after hundreds of people, many from nearby shantytowns, sacked supermarkets, neighborhood grocery stores, butcher shops and bakeries. Provincial and federal government officials, with the assistance of private businesses, distributed meat, bread, pasta, flour, powdered milk and other foodstuffs to the needy in several

Buenos Aires suburbs and major cities, including Mendoza, Cordoba, La Plata and Tucuman. Throughout the country, governments froze prices for basic foods and medicines, and with the assistance of religious workers set up soup kitchens, and coordinated charity collections of food and clothing. In Rosario, 190 miles north of Buenos Aires, markets that escaped looting during the week opened their doors, and long lines quickly formed outside. In Rosario, 3,000 paramilitary police and members of the National Guard and Coast Guard patrolled city streets to enforce the peace and protect stores. Undersecretary of public security in Buenos Aires province, Lt. Col. Carlos Pombo, described the situation as "calm and returning to normal, despite some tension" in suburbs around the capital. In one of the few incidents reported Thursday in Buenos Aires, a police officer was seriously injured when he was shot in the face during a shootout with people trying to loot a butcher's shop in the Caseros suburb. In Tucuman, 820 miles north of the capital, a woman was crushed to death under sugar bags that fell while she and about 50 other people were looting a warehouse. According to a communique by the Interior Ministry released Thursday night, 14 people died and about 80 were wounded during the riots. Earlier counts made on the basis of police and hospital reports indicated 16 people were killed. Isolated incidents of looting and clashes with police were reported in Greater Buenos Aires and provincial capitals during the night. June 2: In the last week, food prices jumped 27%. In addition to the dead and wounded, an estimated 1,700 people were arrested. In May, prices rose about 80%. This month, they are expected to go up 100%. Currently, Argentine banks pay depositors about 2% daily interest. In Buenos Aires crowds mobbed government trucks loaded with bread and milk. The Argentine congress approved \$100 million in emergency aid to a national food program. The Roman Catholic Church is to lead a national food drive. Alvaro Alsogaray, leader of the center-right Union of the Democratic Center, and second runnerup in the presidential elections, said Alfonsin should resign. In a radio interview, he said, "The transfer of power should be brought forward. Let us put an end to the political vacuum because, if not, hyperinflation will continue its march." A Menem aide, Luis Barrionuevo, joined industry and labor leaders in calling for an early transfer of power. "There is a power vacuum," Barrionuevo said. "The present government has got to go." June 4: On Monday evening, looting broke out in northeastern and northern Argentina, resulting in five injured persons and 50 arrests. The most serious incidents occurred in Rio Hondo, 1,230 km. north of Buenos Aires, where some 400 persons looted small businesses and a warehouse where the national government was storing foodstuffs for distribution by local authorities. Next, a police patrol was attacked by a group of unidentified persons armed with small calibre weapons. In the shoot-out, five persons were injured including a child and three policemen. No one was arrested in this incident. In Jujuy, 1,800 km. north of the capital, fans of two soccer clubs clashed among themselves and with police. In the melee, they looted a supermarket and several retail stores. The police arrested 50 persons. In Rosario, 320 km. northwest of the capital, police carried out search and seizure operations in an attempt to locate stolen foodstuffs and responsible parties. Official sources reported that arrests in Rosario had reached 480. (Basic data from AP, DPA, AFP, Xinhua, 06/01/89; New York Times, 06/03/89; Notimex, 06/02/89, 06/05/89)

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