

Argentina's Terror

By John B. Oakes

BUENOS AIRES — Lieut. Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla, President of Argentina and head of the military junta that ousted the disintegrating Perón regime in 1976, speaks with pride as he recounts the junta's accomplishments during the past three years.

"When we took over, there was chaos and a complete vacuum of power," he recalls. "In three years, we've achieved order where there was disorder, peace where there was violence, and progress where there was none. At this stage, our aim is to establish an authentic democracy through a dialogue between the people and the armed forces. This will take some time."

The President's Minister of Finance, José Martínez de Hoz, far and away the most powerful civilian in this military Government and the toast of international bankers, cites a long string of figures to show that — despite persistent inflation of 150 percent or more per annum that is becoming an Argentinian way of life — the economy

of this inherently rich and potentially productive country of 25 million people is on the verge of taking off.

But neither the President nor his Finance Minister is able to give a satisfactory explanation for the continuance of the muted reign of terror under which the Argentine people have been living since even before the coup that brought this law-and-order government to power.

Law and order? The regime has in fact junked the law to achieve and maintain its definition of order. Arbitrary arrest, denial of habeas corpus, brutal prison conditions, kidnapping, torture, murder, dismemberment, disappearance — these have become systematized to achieve a kind of military order at the expense of civil law.

Reign of terror? No less bloody than many previous reigns of terror in other lands and other eras, the Argentinian reign of terror is yet more sinister — executed in the dark, operated in secret, uninhibited by law, uncon-

trolled by authority, unacknowledged in public and (except for the brave, American-owned, English-language Buenos Aires Herald) all but unreported in the press.

It has been responsible for the "disappearance" of at least 5,000 — more probably 15,000 — Argentinian citizens without a trial and without a trace. It has also been responsible for the arrest without warrant and without charges of 2,500 to 3,000 others, some of whom have been languishing in jail for two years or more. Though on much reduced scale in recent months in the face of an impending visit to Argentina of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the arrests

continue — and can always be resumed in full force at a moment's notice.

"What happened at the start was really very simple," said a foreign observer who has lived through it all. "The military Government adopted terrorist tactics to combat the urban guerrillas who in the early and middle 1970's were conducting a reign of terror of their own, including kidnapping, torture and murder. The military were so successful in their undercover war that in less than a year they had achieved their original objective. The two main guerrilla groups were virtually eliminated. But then the regime's counter-terrorism began to take on a

life of its own. The targets have changed but not the methods — and that's where we are today."

Where we are today was demonstrated — until recently — by the weekly gathering in front of Argentina's White House, the "Casa Rosada," of anywhere from a few dozen to a few hundred mothers of some of "the vanished ones," demanding news of their sons and daughters even if nothing more than the knowledge that they were dead or alive.

After some threatening arrests, this form of protest has now been abandoned — but not before the mothers had moved across the Plaza de Mayo from the Casa Rosada to the Cathedral, whose doors were promptly closed in their face.

Where we are today is suggested from time to time by the discovery of bodies washed up along the banks of the River Plata — the bodies often dismembered or disfigured to prevent any possibility of identification.

Where we are today is told in the stories of those few who have come back from imprisonment and who have not been terrorized into silence: tales of degrading torture by electric shock and other devices, of beatings and incarceration in fetid cells far worse than those reserved for common criminals.

Where we are today is revealed in the fate of the 2,500 to 3,000 prisoners suspected of "ideological subversion" and now held under what is called "executive detention." They have been arrested without charge, interrogated under routine torture, imprisoned without trial for indefinite terms.

They are being held entirely at the pleasure of a President who — as he said in an interview a few days ago — looks forward to that distant day when he can have a "dialogue" with the people.

John B. Oakes is the former Senior Editor of The New York Times. This is the first of two articles.