

ARGENTINA:  
A CONSISTENT PATTERN OF  
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

A statement by  
The Argentine Commission for Human Rights  
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Argentina is the most dangerous place to live in the Western Hemisphere today. Merely to advocate free elections or to neglect removing a painted slogan from a wall is a crime. Due process of law, the right to a trial, and the right to legal redress for governmental abuse are non-existent. Since the Armed Forces' takeover of the country in March 1976, the number of political prisoners has risen to 30,000 according to Amnesty International. The number of persons kidnapped and tortured or executed by the government runs into the thousands, and increases every day. A report by the Argentine League for Human Rights even documents the killing of 130 children by police and military forces.

POLITICAL SITUATION

The military junta headed by General Jorge Videla came to power by overthrowing the legally elected government of Isabel Martínez de Perón, a government which had scheduled new elections for December 1976 in order to preserve the continuity of constitutional rule. Thus the only legitimacy that the junta can claim derives from its hegemonic possession and use of military force.

THE JUNTA'S RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Evidence gathered from every quarter indicates that the actions of

the so-called "right-wing death squads", which terrorize the populace, are compatible and in fact indistinguishable from the actions of the "legal" security agencies. This evidence also indicates that the membership of the "death squads" is largely derived from active duty and retired police and military personnel. Additional testimony from Father James Weeks and other U.S. citizens kidnapped by such groups indicates that their captors were in permanent communication with the highest levels of government. Military officers in charge of the predetention camps for these U.S. citizens learned within hours of the inquiries made by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy.

Finally, it must be noted that despite continuous protestations by the junta of the independence of these "death squads", not a single member or alleged member of such a group has been arrested or prosecuted for illegal activities.

### THE FATE OF PRISONERS

A thorough analysis of the dozens and dozens of documents and testimonies which are available from prisoners and their relatives as well as from international investigative teams indicates that the following have become the norms of the judicial process under the military regime:

a) The right to HABEAS CORPUS (guaranteed by the Argentine Constitution) has been abolished. The authorities do not answer inquiries as to the whereabouts of detained persons nor will they make public any list of detainees, claiming such information to be a military secret. There are numerous cases of friends or relatives of disappeared persons themselves being arrested while making such inquiries.

b) The overwhelming number of detainees never come before a Court of Law, and most have no formal charges filed against them. Detainees are generally interrogated, judged and sentenced by those who arrested them or by their military superiors.

c) For those few prisoners who do not come before a military or civilian tribunal there is no such thing as a fair trial. Lawyers who are willing to defend political cases have been killed, kidnapped and/or forced into exile. Most judges are either military men or have been carefully screened by the military, or those few who are believed to be too "lenient" have themselves been threatened and forced to resign their posts.

d) The government does not recognize the right of persons detained under State of Siege regulations to choose exile from the country, as is guaranteed by Article 23 of the Argentine Constitution.

### POLITICAL REFUGEES IN ARGENTINA

Estimates of the number of political refugees in Argentina run as high as 20,000, and it is widely documented that these persons have been special targets for the kidnapping, torture and execution which have become so commonplace in that country today. Perhaps



the best indication of the active role of the government in this persecution is the free rein with which agents of the Chilean and Uruguayan police themselves operate within Argentine borders in search of refugees from those countries. The Uruguayan police, for example, occupy a whole floor of the Federal Police Building in Buenos Aires.

The situation for refugees in Argentina is so bad that the Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations has issued a call to the democratic nations of the world to accept those refugees into their own countries.

#### THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Perhaps no sector of the population has felt the lash of the military as hard as has the trade union movement, heretofore one of the most important influences in Argentine society. Immediately after the coup 36 of the largest and most influential unions were put under the direct control of military administrators. All union activities, such as collective bargaining, the free election of union officers, and plant meetings, were prohibited. Strikes were banned and a ten-year prison sentence was decreed for strike organizers. Laws regulating layoffs and working hours and conditions were annulled, and a wage freeze instituted which has resulted in a 50% reduction in purchasing power for the average worker. Union officials, shop stewards, and plant delegates became important targets for security forces.

#### RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Priests and other church leaders have been singled out for particular attention. A report by the Catholic Institute for International Relations states that as of October 1976, 17 priests had disappeared or been killed, 16 more arrested, 4 deported, and 9 forced to leave the country because of threats to their lives. The Bishop of La Rioja, Monsignor Angelelli was also murdered on August 4 while investigating the killing of two priests.

Anti-Semitism has also flourished since the coup. In August 1976 alone, more than 20 Jewish-owned shops were machine-gunned along with a Jewish school and a bank. Nazi literature is openly sold throughout the country. Writing in The Nation on February 12, 1977, author Harry Maurer concluded that the situation constitutes "one of the ugliest eruptions of anti-semitism since the Holocaust".

#### ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS AND SCIENTISTS

State of Siege regulations prohibit the publication of any news not provided or approved by the official military press office. More than 30 newspapers, magazines and radio stations were closed down in the first five months after the coup, and in the same period an estimated 300 journalists were jailed. In August 1976 alone 12 men and women journalists were kidnapped, killed or arrested.

Universities and other educational institutions have been equally hard-hit by the policies of the government. Science Magazine in its December 1976 issue documents the firing of hundreds of scientists from their jobs, and the arrest without charges of many others. Only those courses approved by the government may now be taught.

#### A CONSISTENT PATTERN OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

A wide range of international organizations and investigative teams have concluded that human rights violations are routine policy in Argentina today. These include Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and members of the Canadian parliament and the U.S. Congress.

The existence of these violations is also attested to by the mounting stream of documents and testimonies from prisoners and their relatives which have been sent out of Argentina at great risk to their authors. The denial of due process, the suspension of the judicial system and the trade unions, the systematic kidnapping and execution of persons from all strata of society, and the use of torture in its most hideous forms are so pervasive in Argentina today as to lead to the inescapable conclusion that the pattern of human rights violations there is deliberate, ongoing, and persistent.

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