

President Jorge Rafael Videla has said: "All the necessary persons will die in Argentina to assure the country's security." *"Star", Sunday, December 17, 1978*

Terror of the 1st rank

By Stephen Kinzer

The veneer of normality covering daily life in Argentina is very thin, but it is convincing enough for anyone who prefers not to know the truth. This group includes most Argentines and almost all visitors.

Buenos Aires lives up to its reputation as one of the most cosmopolitan, sophisticated cities in the world. Well-stocked department stores and trendy boutiques are crammed with high-fashion clothing and other expensive goods. Smartly-dressed pedestrians throng the streets, taxis are plentiful and full of prosperous Argentines in tuxedos and long gowns heading to the opera and the first-rate symphony orchestra.

To all outward appearances, Buenos Aires is back to normal. Until the World Cup soccer championship series held here last June, some visitors were disturbed by heavily armed policemen on street corners and truckloads of soldiers in battle gear visible on busy thoroughfares. But in an effort to put on a favorable show for the thousands of foreign visitors and journalists who came for the big event, the heavy displays of force were removed, and they have not reappeared.

But anyone who wants to know the truth here can discover it without much difficulty. The most visible crack in the veneer is a silent procession of about 200 middle-aged women that takes place in front of the president's office every Thursday afternoon. They are mothers of *desaparecidos*, people who have disappeared in the past two years.

Argentina today is governed by terrorists in military uniforms. They have unleashed a reign of savagery unmatched in the modern history of

the Western Hemisphere, dwarfing in scope and intensity even the post-coup repression in Pinochet's Chile and the terror of Duvalier's Haiti. Since the military takeover on March 24, 1976, in the name of freedom and with the stated ultimate goal of returning the nation to democracy, between 10,000 and 15,000 people have been killed after being kidnapped by police from their homes or offices. Their mutilated bodies have been dumped in the River Plate or cremated late at night at the Chacarita cemetery in Buenos Aires. About 4,000 corpses, most unidentifiable, have been discovered in common graves and on the river banks. Thousands more *desaparecidos* are still alive, held somewhere in a prison and special detention camps, the existence of which is amply documented but firmly denied by the government.

There are more countries than we may care to admit where a prisoner may be beaten after his arrest, perhaps burned with a cigarette, or even shot dead and dumped in a ravine for grieving relatives to find. But that is not at all how repression works in Argentina. Here the government has consciously decided to use kidnappings, well-planned torture of specific sorts and extended imprisonment in camps whose existence is officially denied as its prime weapons against everyone it perceives as an enemy.

Even the government leaders admit that they have long since found and defeated almost everyone who ever participated in the two terrorist groups that were active here during the early part of the 1970s. The targets of repression now have shifted to such a broad range of Argentines that almost no one can feel safe. "We have concluded the military phase of repression and we must now continue against ideologues," a high Argentine official explained in September. "This struggle will take many years, because a person with an ideology is

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TERROR

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even more dangerous than those who carry arms."

President Jorge Rafael Videla himself put it succinctly at a press conference last May: "All the necessary persons will die in Argentina to assure the country's security." Four months earlier, he put the same sentiment this way: "A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to western civilization."

The military men in power believe that they are fighting a third world war which, by a quirk of history, happened to begin in Argentina. This is the war that western, Christian culture is fighting against those who would subvert it and replace it with a godless, communistic ideology. The military government believes, therefore, that it is doing western culture a great favor by assuming the burden of this war, and remains puzzled that, far from receiving acclaim and gratitude from the nations on whose behalf it presumes to be fighting, especially the United States, it is being criticized for the methods it uses.

When the military seized control in 1976 from the hopelessly corrupt and incompetent Isabel Peron, it immediately implemented a pre-planned campaign against groups it considered subversive. The first targets were the two guerrilla groups whose terror tactics had disrupted national life and put much of the population in genuine fear. The government claims there were as many as 20,000 fighters in the two groups, the Montoneros and the Revolutionary People's Army (ERP); but the actual number of militants was less than 5,000, many of whose identities were known to authorities. Within a few months after the coup, these people were dead; no more than 200 survive today.

All suspected militants — including many who must have been innocent — were captured in a similar fashion. Their homes were broken into by armed men in civilian clothes, and they were taken directly to a nearby prison prepared especially to receive them. There they were tortured for information about their activities and associates. Everyone they named, plus everyone whose name appeared in their personal address books or notes found in their homes, was arrested as well and subjected to the same treatment. Prisoners suspected of having committed or having known about acts of violence were killed after their jailers were convinced that they had extracted all the information in the prisoners' possession. In most cases, they were injected with a knockout drug, shot in the head while unconscious and dumped in the River Plate at night after their stomachs were slit open so they would not rise to the surface.

But the work did not stop after

sive terrorism" was defeated. Like widening ripples in a pool, the circle of victims continued to expand. First it was those believed to have committed terrorist acts; then those who had legal contacts with people who may have supported them, such as doctors and lawyers; then friends and colleagues of those who had such contact, and so on. In recent months, those who had anything to do with one of the many organized Peronist groups, such as summer camps, labor unions or student federations, are falling victim — in many cases, people who never thought that the reign of terror would reach their doorstep.

The system in use today has been slightly refined from what it was just after the coup. Instead of a dozen armed thugs crashing through the door at midnight, two well-dressed men — backed by more outside in the unmarked Ford Falcons that are the trademark of the security forces — knock on the door and ask for the intended victim by name. They either ask him to come to the station for "routine questioning" or invent some ruse like wanting to speak to him about a motor vehicle violation. "In 90 per cent of these cases," explained one observer who monitors these patterns closely, "the guys they're getting now are law-abiding citizens who, if you sent them a postcard in the mail asking them to be at the police station at a certain hour, would willingly show up."

The victim may put on a fresh suit, kiss his wife, and promise to be home for dinner. He is never heard from again. Then when distraught relatives call at the police station or barracks, they are told firmly that the police never heard of the supposed victim, that they know nothing of his whereabouts and that the questioners would be wise not to pursue their inquiries further.

Patterns emerge from repeated stories of people who have been released from prison and from letters smuggled out of jails. Most prisoners are badly beaten upon capture. When the victim is only a casual target — say, the mother of a suspected offender — a beating and a few days of immersion in buckets of water or human waste may be enough. Many of these people are then released and told to remain silent about what happened. But the released ones are in a small, relatively fortunate minority.

For the rest, daily life begins to revolve around the *picana*, the electric cattle prod that is the basic weapon of torture in Argentina. Patricia Erb, a 19-year-old American resident of Buenos Aires, was arrested in 1976 and later released due to international pressure and her status as an American citizen. The apparent reason for her abduction was her field work as a sociology student in Buenos Aires slums.

"This torture took various forms," she wrote after her release, "beating with clubs and fists, kicks, immersion in water or fecal substance almost to the point of drowning, and

to the most sensitive parts of the body. In order to cause greater pain, they would tie us down on a wire bed which carried an electric current and entangle wire between fingers and toes, splashing water on us in order to increase the pain."

Again, torture, even in these extremes, exists in many countries of varied ideology. But Argentina is special because the torture has been bureaucratized and made routine to the point where identical stories are told of prisons separated by thousands of miles and operated by different branches of the security forces and military.

It is difficult to understand how Argentina, by most standards the most advanced nation in Latin America, could have fallen into its present agony. It has the highest literacy rate in South America (95 per cent), an elite of U.S.-trained technicians, virtually no unemployment or starvation, until recently more doctors per capita than even the U.S. and Canada, and a capital city known as one of the world's cultural centers.

Part of the explanation may be found in the last days of the Peronist revival. When Juan Peron was permitted to return, in June 1973, a demonstration of three million jubilant Argentines turned ugly as right-wing Peronists attacked left-wing Peronists, including Montonero guerrillas who had laid down arms to greet their hero. The strategy of the military in inviting him back was to split the guerrillas off from Peron, and it worked. Peron immediately threw his lot with the right wing of his movement after being elected president in 1974, and the guerrillas turned increasingly to terror tactics.

The guerrilla movement in Argentina had begun to take on strength in 1969. But terrorist violence only became common after they were denounced by Peron. "This was a desperate, murderous situation," one liberal Argentine recalls. "Anyone and everyone was fair game. You could send your child to school and not know whether the bus was going to explode. These were serious terrorists, not your fuzzy-checked altruistic university youth."

The terrorism reached its peak during the presidency of Peron's widow, Isabel. Two judges were killed, two dozen businessmen kidnapped and, according to official figures, 152 policemen were shot down

some only because they happened to be wearing a uniform. These events, coupled with growing economic chaos, led to the military coup of March 24, 1976, which brought to power the present government headed by General Videla.

One Argentine expressed the universally held view here: "The coup was an absolute necessity and was backed by the entire Argentine people." Whether the methods used by the Videla regime to suppress terrorism and, later, to impose its own brand of ideological purity on Argentina were then foreseen is much less certain.

The immediate goal of Videla's junta was to wipe out the terrorists. In the absence of even a semblance of due process, it is impossible to say how many of those arrested, tortured and killed were guilty, but within a few months after the coup, active terrorism had ceased; to reappear only sporadically at increasingly long intervals.

But the demise of guerrilla terrorism did not end the government terror. On the contrary, the security forces, once liberated from the constraints of law and morality, have applied these same methods to their perceived war against "ideological criminals." Among the first targets were the professions of psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis, considered fundamentally subversive. Journalists who have disobeyed Orwellian laws against inciting others to mistrust the government have perished; 53 are believed dead and almost as many more have disappeared. During a recent medical congress in Buenos Aires, visiting cancer researchers produced a list of 189 doctors and nurses who have been kidnapped and not heard from since. Anyone who ever had contact with a Peronist organization is now considered a fair target. Since Peron won 62 per cent of the vote in his last election, a majority of the Argentine population is at least theoretically in danger, even though many of the present military leaders once considered themselves Peronists.

Half a million Argentines have left their country since the coup, most of them high-level professionals. Anyone involved in medicine, sociology, the social sciences or political activity or study is in great danger; many of those who foresaw their vulnerability fled to Madrid, Rome, Mexico and Caracas, where com-

munities of highly-trained Argentine exiles have sprung up.

The declared aim of the Videla regime is "a transition to a stable democracy in which the role of the armed forces will be guaranteed," a political process open to "all sectors except the subversive and the corrupt," a "union of all representative groups of citizens."

Videla has referred obliquely to "the so sad reality" of contemporary Argentina, but when pressed on the subject of disappearances, he responds only that the supposed victims must actually have left the country without telling anyone. Economics Minister Martinez de Hoz, the most powerful civilian in the government, says that "we have used with the terrorists the same drastic methods that they used."

The squads responsible for administering the present terror are drawn from regular internal police and from the military. These dreaded "combined forces" often work with contract hoodlums who do much of the kidnapping.

During last March and April, in preparation for the World Cup series, the number of kidnappings was reduced, only to increase again immediately following the games. But apparently the number of kidnappings in 1978 is down to about three or four a week. A few prisoners have been released or allowed to leave the country lately. And a few months ago, 24 "disappeared" prisoners held at the supposedly nonexistent camps in the countryside turned up in an official jail at La Plata.

The Spanish-language press in Argentina is quite timid in reporting daily events, its editors explaining that their readers are "not interested" in hearing about disappearance and torture. Academic and cultural life in general have been devastated. The Videla regime has succeeded in emasculating society, while liberating and encouraging the most base forces within it.

And yet for most Argentines, life is almost as normal as it seems to visitors. Just as many of them preferred to ignore the terrorism of a few years ago, many now argue against all reason that such things as kidnapping and torture do not happen in Argentina today. Even the great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges rejoices that his country is now run by "officers and gentlemen."