

Human Rights Problems in Argentina (March 6, 1978)  
Extract from overall strategy memo

The Argentine military took power in March, 1976 in the midst of a general breakdown in political, judicial, and socio-economic institutions which resulted in widespread terrorism and hyper-inflation. This move, and the junta's subsequent attacks on terrorism, were generally accepted by political parties and labor unions.

Since then, however, the GOA has waged an all out war not only on those it believes directly or indirectly involved in violence but also on ideological opponents and those who would challenge the harshness of government tactics.

The Argentine government continues to engage in a consistent pattern of gross violations of human rights. This includes lawyers, intellectuals, churchmen, and prolonged detention without charges, trial, or recourse to legal counsel are commonplace. Thousands of people have disappeared. Over 3,600 prisoners are being held as "executive" or state of seige prisoners with others (some say as many as 3,000) reportedly being held secretly. The last probably are, in good measure, beyond the control of central authorities. Political freedoms are non-existent. All this despite the fact that the terrorist threat has been greatly reduced.

There are credible reports of headless and handless bodies, dumped at sea from airplanes by security forces being found at Atlantic beaches.

There is a strong a persistent pattern of anti-semitism in the pattern of violations. Several cases of this kind have excited the contuing intense interest of important segments of the American Jewish community.

President Videla portrays himself as the moderate within the junta, wanting to redress the worst ills of the regime. So far he has been either unable or unwilling to do much to that end, though since Christmas he has taken useful, if tentative steps. Even Argentine opponents of the regime, however, usually concede that, in the immediate future, hope for progress rests with Videla and other military "moderates."

Over 300 prisoners have probably been released since December 1977, and another 100 or so turned over to the courts for trial. A small number of those released have been re-arrested, and some of the released may be common criminals. In February, the GOA published the names of more than 1,900 detainees and more are promised. And it appears to be implementing "right of option" or voluntary exile procedures for some political prisoners. This is a very small beginning, (far short of the hope President Videla expressed to President Carter in September that the detainee problem would be resolved by the end of 1977) and other disappearances continue even in the midst of it. More may now be detained under executive order than in December. Nonetheless, it is the first tangible sign we have either that the military believes that the terrorist threat is under control; or that it is responsive to human rights pressure; or a combination of the two.

Department of State, A/GIS/IPS/SRP

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Date 1-30-76