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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 HA-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5254

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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, PNUC, AR
SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH PRESIDENT VIDELA ON NUNS' DEATH

REF: (A) STATE 89468, (B) BA 2635

1. UPON RECEIPT OF REPTTEL LAST FRIDAY I MADE THE NECESSARY FORMAL REQUEST FOR AN APPOINTMENT WITH PRESIDENT VIDELA. USCINCSO, LTG. MCAULIFFE HAD EARLIER OBTAINED AN APPOINTMENT WITH VIDELA IN HIS ROLE AS COMMANDER OF THE ARGENTINE ARMY FOR 10 TODAY AND THE GENERAL LET ME TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS OPPORTUNITY TO REACH PRESIDENT VIDELA BEFORE AN APPOINTMENT WOULD BE FORTHCOMING NORMALLY.

2. GEN. MCAULIFFE INFORMED THE PRESIDENT OF THE PURPOSE OF HIS VISIT (REPORTED SEPARATELY) AND HEAVILY STRESSED THAT IMPROVED RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IS AN INDISPENSIBLE BASIS FOR GOOD RELATIONS WITH NOT ONLY THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES, BUT ALSO WITH THE U.S. ARMED FORCES. FOLLOWING HIS PRESENTATION THE PRESIDENT AGREED TO HEAR THE MESSAGE WHICH I HAD SOUGHT AN APPOINTMENT WITH HIM TO DELIVER. I REVIEWED WITH HIM THE DEPTH OF OUR CONCERN ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES IN ARGENTINA AND THE SATISFACTION WITH WHICH WE HAD GREETED SEVERAL POSITIVE ACTIONS SUCH AS PUBLICATION OF LISTS OF EXECUTIVE DETAINEES AND THE RIGHT OF

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OPTION. WE HAD TRIED TO INDICATE OUR SUPPORT OF THESE MODEST STEPS BY ABSTENTIONS ON IFI LOANS AND THE SALES OF SOME MILITARY EQUIPMENT. I SAID THE REPORTS OF THE DEATHS OF THE TWO NUNS HAD DEALT A SERIOUS BLOW TO USG VIEWS OF ARGENTINE PROGRESS ON OBSERVANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS. IT WAS OUR VIEW THAT IT IS CRUCIAL FOR THE GOA TO ESTABLISH RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DEATHS OF NUNS AND PUNISH THOSE RESPONSIBLE.

3. PRESIDENT VIDELA'S RESPONSE TO THE REPRESENTATION REGARDING THE NUNS WAS THAT HE WAS AWARE THAT THE DISAPPEARANCES HAD A SERIOUSLY ADVERSE EFFECT UPON THE WORLD'S VIEW OF ARGENTINA AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DISAPPEARANCES MUST BE DISCOVERED AND THOSE RESPONSIBLE JUDGED. HE STRESSED THIS WAS VIEWED WITH UTMOST GRAVITY AND HAD BEEN THE SUBJECT OF INTENSE INVESTIGATION. HE SAID THAT WHILE THE INVESTIGATION HAD SO FAR PRODUCED NO SIGNIFICANT RESULTS IT WOULD CONTINUE TO BE PRESSED. THEY HAD FOUND NOTHING TO CONFIRM THE REPORTS THAT THE BODIES OF THE DISAPPEARED HAD BEEN FOUND BUT WOULD CONTINUE INVESTIGATIONS WITH A VIEW TOWARD MINIMIZING THE SERIOUS DAMAGE TO THE COUNTRY.

4. THE PRESIDENT REVERTED TO THE THEME WHICH HE HAD EXPRESSED TO GEN. MCAULIFFE: THE WAR IS OVER; IT IS TIME

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TO RETURN TO A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY GOVERNED BY THE RULE OF LAW. SOME STEPS HAVE BEEN TAKEN AND THESE WERE NOT ALWAYS EASY, AND FURTHER STEPS WILL FOLLOW, HOPEFULLY ON A MORE SYSTEMATIC BASIS. HE CLEARLY GAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT HE NEEDED SOME RECOGNITION OF THE POSITIVE MEASURES.

5. PRESIDENT VIDELA ALSO CONFIRMED THAT JACOBO TIMERMAN WOULD BE "GOING HOME SOON", BUT WOULD NOT BE TOTALLY FREE UNTIL THE ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES REVIEWING THE LEGALITY OF HIS ACQUISITION OF HIS WEALTH HAVE BEEN COMPLETED.

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THE CONVERSATION ENDED WITH THE PRESIDENT'S CONFIRMATION THAT THE GOA WILL RATIFY THE TREATY OF TLATELOLCO BY MAY 24 (SEPEL).

6. COMMENT: PRESIDENT CLEARLY GOT THE MESSAGE THAT USG IS OUTRAGED AND CANNOT MOVE TOWARD IMPROVED RELATIONS IN THE FACE OF DISAPPEARANCES. AT SAME TIME HE HAD NO ACCEPTABLE LINE TO TAKE OTHER THAN THE DENIAL OF FIRM INFORMATION ON THE DEATHS (THIS MAY BE CORRECT, AT LEAST IN A FORMAL SENSE, BUT IS NOT A MITIGATING FACTOR). THE GENERAL AND I WERE IMPRESSED WITH VIDELA'S APPARENTLY GENUINE DESIRE TO MAINTAIN CLOSE RELATIONS WITH THE USG AND HIS APPARENT COMMITMENT TO MOVE TOWARD NORMALIZATION. WHEN I RAISED A REPORT OF A NUMBER OF PEOPLE DISAPPEARING AT THE SAN JUSTO CHURCH, HE EXPRESSED DISMAY AND SAID HE WOULD LOOK INTO IT PROMPTLY. OF INTEREST IS HIS USE OF THE PHRASE "THE WAR IS OVER". THIS IS THE FIRST TIME WE HAVE HEARD HIM, OR OTHER GOVERNMENT LEADERS, TAKE THIS POSITION WHICH WILL NOT BE POPULAR THROUGHOUT THE MILITARY, BUT IS A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR RETURN TO RULE OF LAW. PRESIDENT WILL BE GETTING ANOTHER REPRESENTATION TODAY ON HUMAN RIGHTS FROM ARGENTINE CHURCH HIERARCHY WHICH IS BEGINNING TO STIFFEN ITS BACK A BIT IN DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, A HEARTENING DEVELOPMENT.

7. IN A DISCUSSION WITH FRENCH AMBASSADOR ON APRIL 7, HE TOLD ME THAT THE GOF HAD CONCLUDED THAT IT IS FRUITLESS TO PRESS THE GOA FURTHER ON THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE NUNS-- BILATERAL RELATIONS HAD NOW BECOME SEVERELY STRAINED. THE GOF HAD DECIDED UPON A COURSE WHICH PARALLELS THAT OF THE ARGENTINE CHURCH; PRESSING FOR IMPROVED TREATMENT OF PRISONERS, TRIAL OR RELEASE OF EXECUTIVE DETAINEES, AND REGULARIZED ARREST PROCEDURES. WE WILL CONTINUE TO REPORT ANY PLAUSIBLE INFORMATION WE RECEIVE ABOUT THE NUNS AND THEIR ASSOCIATES.
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