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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

PARTICIPANTS: Rev. Jaime Wright, Committee for the
Defense of Human Rights for Countries
of the Southern Cone
Stephen Bosworth, Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Inter-American Affairs
John C. Leary, Consul General
Thomas G. Martin, Political Officer

PLACE: Rev. Wright's residence

DATE: November 20, 1981

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Wright began the discussion with comments on his personal background and on how he, a Presbyterian Minister, happened to be working for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of São Paulo. Born in Santa Catarina of American Presbyterian missionary parents, Wright holds Brazilian citizenship. For years he was head of the Presbyterian Mission Board in Brazil, and was involved in the transfer of U.S. Presbyterian assets in the country to local control. In effect, he said, he worked himself out of a job. Several years ago, because of his involvement in human rights affairs which had brought him into close contact with those in the São Paulo Archdiocese working on the subject, Wright was asked by Cardinal Arns to join his staff. A formal request was made to the Presbyterian Church and Wright was seconded to the Catholic Church in São Paulo, a position which he believes to be unique.

Wright said that under the Archdiocesan Commission for Human Rights there were four active committees: one dealing with political prisoners and missing persons in southern cone countries, one dealing with the poor, one dealing with legal issues (Commission on Justice and Peace) and one concentrating on workers and labor unions. Under the direction of the Curia, the four committees are basically composed of lay leaders.

Commenting on the changes that have taken place in Brazil in his lifetime, Wright said that the Catholic Church in much of Brazil had undergone tremendous change. For centuries, it was

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often indistinguishable from the government in its attitudes and actions. However, from the 1960's attitudes began to change and during the darkest days of government repression in the late 1960's, the Church moved over to the other side and became the defender of the people. Wright noted that during this period he had approached Cardinal Arns, who he had not known well until then, to seek assistance himself in locating his brother who had disappeared. Wright said that the Cardinal had given him help, but that his brother who had been "involved in subversive activities" and who had been "underground" for several years had never been located. Presumably, he had been arrested, tortured and killed, he said.

Turning to the situation at present, Wright, while generally skeptical of the government's intentions, said that there were no political prisoners in Brazil today. That, he admitted, was a definite improvement. Yet, the government (or the system as he sometimes referred to it) was unwilling to remove controls. As an example, he mentioned the proposed (and since adopted) foreigner's law which he said was designed to maintain total control. When Mr. Bosworth expressed surprise, saying that he had understood that the Church and human rights circles had had their objections to the law acceded to, Wright said that this was the general, but erroneous impression. The proposed law still violated the Universal Convention on Human Rights and the Brazilian Constitution, he said. Foreigners could "apply" for permanent status within a period of two years, but it was up to the government to grant it or not. Family groups of mixed nationality (Brazilian and foreign) could be expelled he noted, pointing out that if his wife (an American) did not behave, he (a Brazilian) could be expelled with her. The main target of the law for the GOB was the foreign priest, he said. Brazilian security officials were no longer concerned with Protestant churchmen (who bored the police with their frequent denunciations of each other), but were concerned with the foreign Catholic clergy, especially priests in missionary areas, i.e., outside regular diocesan boundaries.

From their work with the poor and landless in the interior these priests often found themselves at odds with authority. In many of the more isolated parts of Brazil the foreign priests represented the only check on unscrupulous landlords and officials of the system. Activism on the part of priests was often met by violence on the part of those interested in maintaining the status quo. Wright said that as he saw it the two most serious problems in Brazil at present were land ownership and police brutality. While he did not consider brutality by the police to be sanctioned officially, he said that it was widespread and unchecked.

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Because of his close ties to the United States, Wright said that he had been disappointed in the reversal of human rights policy by the Reagan administration. Mr. Bosworth took issue with Wright's description, noting that there had been a tactical change in approach to human rights problems, but that the commitment by the people of the United States and by the USG to the promotion of human rights remained strong. The change in tactics had, in fact, produced some gains in the resolution of specific cases of human rights abuses. Upon departing, a copy of a statement before the SFRC by Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Abrams was left with Wright.



Drafted & Approved by: APO:TGMartin:jab