

Argentine church leaders accused of human rights abuses cover-up

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Buenos Aires--A Argentinian naval captain has accused present Navy officials and church leaders of covering up human rights abuses during the 1976-1983 "dirty war".

Captain Adolfo Scilingo accused church officials of providing justification for torture and murders of dissidents during that time period. Scilingo was a high ranking official in the infamous Mechanical School which housed many of detainees during the war.

Scilingo said that between 1,500 and 2,000 detainees were thrown alive into the ocean from Navy and Marine airplanes during 1976 and 77 by orders from the military high command.

"When the airplane commander gave the order, the doors were opened and they (the detainees) were thrown into the ocean one by one," the captain told an investigating tribunal on March 4.

Scilingo said that the commander of the naval operations had consulted with ecclesiastical authorities to seek justification for their actions. "The chaplains comforted the officials after each flight with Biblical parables," he said.

Argentina's president Carlos Menem called Scilingo a dreamer who has been frustrated in his hope to achieve higher positions.

Argentina is facing the opening of old wounds as it deals with human rights abuses of the past. The late 1970's disappearance of two French nuns has drawn international interest.

The scars have been reopened by a government attempt to promote two Navy officers who have been implicated in the crackdown on leftists in the 1970's which left more than 9,000 people kidnapped, tortured or killed.

At the center of Argentina's controversy is the disappearance of two French nuns in 1977. The families of the two nuns believe the women were tortured, killed and their bodies dumped into unmarked graves.

The Argentine senate recently blocked the promotion of Commanders Juan Carlos Rolon and Antonio Pernias, but the frightening remarks by Pernias admitting for the first time the use of torture as a tool of repression have raised cries of protest.

In 1987, an official investigation into the events of the late 1970's directly implicated Pernias in the kidnapping of the nuns.

President Carlos Menem, who was imprisoned by the junta and says he was tortured, has granted amnesty to the junta leaders.

Menem has angered civil rights groups by urging legislators "not to look back" in considering the promotions, and then telling a military ceremony that it was thanks armed forces that the rebellion of the "dirty war" was overcome.

Opponents say he wants to placate the military at a time of growing discontent over pay.

Horacio Mendez Carreras, an Argentine lawyer who represents the nun's families said he wants the military officials questioned about the location of the bodies of the nuns so their families can give them a Christian funeral.

Meanwhile, the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" still hold a vigil every Thursday for those who are missing. Representatives of the group say that Menem is creating an atmosphere of confrontation. They lobbied against the Rolon and Pernias promotions, not out of hate or vengeance, but as a call for justice and the truth about those who disappeared.

Mendez Carreras, says he believes Argentina is paying for a miscalculated attempt at reconciliation, which began with president Raul Alfonsin's "full stop" law of 1986 putting a time limit on suits against military or police.

The military's top officials say the armed forces do not need vindicating and that Pernias and Rolon must have been mistaken when when they said torture was routinely used.

But a former admiral has reported that torture was definitely used at the Navy's Mechanical School in BUENOS AIRES -- the most infamous detention centre of the dirty war, where rights groups say 5,000 were taken in and only 400 came out alive.

Since many men who were junior officers during the junta days now due for promotion, the debate is unlikely to disappear quickly, the admiral said. Next year promotion is due for Alfredo Astiz, the Navy officer sentenced to jail by a French court for his part in the disappearance of the nuns.

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