

Diplomatic flap over French disappeared during Argentina dirty war

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--The disappearance of two Roman Catholic nuns during Argentina's "dirty war", and the failure of the Argentine government to resolve the issue with France led to a diplomatic flap which was resolved only after France backed down.

France backed away from the diplomatic spat and agreed to invite the Argentine navy's top officer to Bastille Day celebrations July 14.

French Ambassador Renaud Vignal had not invited Admiral Jose Molina Pico because Molina Pico had publicly praised the morals of Captain Alfredo Astiz, an Argentine officer wanted by French courts for the kidnap and murder of the two French nuns during Argentina's 1970s "dirty war."

Vignal said he reversed his stand after Argentine Deputy Foreign Minister Fernando Petrella denied that the navy chief had insulted French institutions.

"Petrella's statement satisfies me entirely, as it corresponds to a sweeping denial of what Molina Pico said May 5 and Molina Pico associated himself to that denial," Vignal said.

Argentina's defense minister said he was "annoyed and surprised" by France's decision to exclude the Argentine Navy chief from the guest list for the party.

But Defence Minister Oscar Camilion played down worries that the decision had become a full-blown diplomatic spat, describing France's behavior as just "not normal" procedure. Camilion expressed surprise that France had made the issue public, saying that such discussions are normally held discreetly.

The French embassy in Buenos Aires usually invites all top Argentine officials to the annual party.

Camilion said that no one in his ministry would participate in the July 14 celebration to show solidarity with Molina Pico if the snub continued.

A French Foreign Ministry spokesman in Paris said that "Admiral Pico made remarks which were unfriendly and insulting to the memory of the victims."

"His untimely statements were in contrast with the quality of Franco-Argentine relations and the commendable work of self-examination the Argentine armed forces are now engaged in."

Recently, Argentine Army chief General Martin Balza made the first public apology for the "dirty war" in which over 9,000 people "disappeared" and 4,000 people were confirmed killed.

After the French Embassy failed to include Molina Pico in its guest list, Menem's Cabinet chief, Eduardo Bauza, advised top

officials to shun the embassy's celebrations in solidarity with the navy officer.

A government official who asked not to be identified said that no top official would have attended the party if France had not reversed its decision.

Astiz, still a serving officer, cannot leave Argentina because of an Interpol arrest order issued after a French court found him guilty in his absence in the disappearance of nuns Alice Dumont and Leonie Duquet.

Astiz infiltrated human rights group Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo during the former military government's 1970s terror campaign against leftists. He has been linked with the subsequent disappearances of one of its founders, Azucena Villaflor, and of a Swedish-Argentine teenage girl, Dagmar Hagelin.

He cannot be tried by Argentine courts because of a law passed by the government of former President Raul Alfonsin pardoning junior officers guilty of human rights abuses.

France faced a similar diplomatic flap in Chile where several congressmen urged colleagues not to attend the celebration in Santiago because of France's recent decision to resume nuclear tests in the South Pacific.

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