

# Argentine President backs war on drugs

by Cynthia Rush

Argentine President Carlos Menem has made the war on drug trafficking a key aspect of his government program. He has offered material and moral support to Colombia's offensive against the drug mafia, and has taken steps to reverse the permissive legislation which characterized the government of his predecessor, Raúl Alfonsín.

In discussion with reporters on Aug. 27, Menem reiterated his support for the death penalty for drug traffickers, adding, however, that such punishment was not appropriate for drug consumers. The latter "are the victims of these criminals." It is the drug lords who have "set into motion this filthy drug business," Menem said, and there is no reason for the "brains" of the drug trade "to live within our community."

The Argentine President explained that "in some countries like Colombia, a state has been created within the legal state, put into motion by the drug traffickers together with the guerrillas." This apparatus is being expanded, Menem warned, "and is destroying vast sectors of the community."

In response to Colombian President Virgilio Barco's urgent appeal for support delivered to the conference of Non-Aligned nations which met in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in early September, Menem stated, "We fully support Colombia in its struggle against drug trafficking, and we have given instructions that three or four anti-guerrilla aircraft be handed over for the transport of troops in the struggle against drug traffickers. We are all interested in this struggle." Argentine Foreign Minister Domingo Cavallo offered the Guarani transport planes to his Colombian counterpart, Julio Londoño on Sept. 6.

In addition, the Argentine government has offered six Pucará planes to the Colombian armed forces to use in the war on drugs. Produced in Argentina, the Pucará is a very versatile aircraft, particularly useful in jungle areas.

## The home front

In the framework of Ibero-America's drug trade, Argentina has functioned as a nation of transit, through which drugs are transported to locations in Europe and the U.S.A. In recent years, especially under the permissive regime of Raúl Alfonsín, drug consumption in the country has increased significantly. Now with the crackdown in Colombia, Argentin

authorities fear that leaders of the Colombian cartels will attempt to expand their activities in the nations of the Southern Cone.

Alberto Lestelle, director of the National Coordinating Secretariat for the Fight Against Drugs, an agency created since Menem took office, warned Sept. 10 that both the Medellín and Cali cartels "are trying to invest and establish themselves in Argentina, but added that national organizations "are alert to this possibility."

In a Sept. 6 interview with Telam news agency, Lestelle explained that Colombian drug traffickers could enter the country through Argentina's northwest border. This is all the more possible, he said, since neighboring Bolivia could potentially "become another Colombia." Argentina's northwest has "a climate, conditions, and language very similar to Bolivia's," Lestelle said, and called on security organizations to agree to increase patrols in the "red zone" of the northern provinces of Salta, Formosa, and Jujuy.

Earlier this year, even before the crackdown in Colombia began, Peronist deputy Eduardo Varela Cid denounced the fact that the Medellín Cartel had set up offices in Buenos Aires province, and warned that drug trafficking "will be a very serious problem in Argentina in a short time." Varela Cid is a member of the House of Deputies' Commission on Drug Addiction.

Varela told Telam news agency that his commission is working on organizing a conference of international legislators, tentatively set for the middle of next year, in a still undetermined location. Legislators from Ibero-America, Europe, and the United States would attend to analyze a plan called "Debt, Democracy, and Drugs."

The deputy added that "we cannot talk about drugs without talking about the foreign debt," because the debt has drastically affected the standard of living and has consequently "lowered the people's moral threshold."

On Sept. 9, chiefs of police of nine northern provinces met in Salta to discuss beefing up anti-drug work in the country's northwest region, to interdict drugs entering the country from both Bolivia and Brazil. The police chiefs approved a document which stressed the need for "appropriate equipment" as well as "specific funds to attend to drug addiction problems." According to Alberto Lestelle, there are between 80,000 and 100,000 drug addicts in Argentina, and they become addicted generally between the ages of 12 and 23. "Drugs are consumed by kids, but this is an adult business," Lestelle warns.

In the Argentine Congress, steps have been taken to introduce tough new anti-drug laws which would make possession for personal consumption a crime, punishable by a prison term of between one month to two years. Drug trafficking, production, or marketing of drugs would be punished with stiffer sentences of up to 25 years. It is expected that this legislation will be approved before the Congress finishes its regular session this year.