

Military crisis builds in Argentina

by Cynthia R. Rush

The crisis in Argentina's Armed Forces is reaching the boiling point, as high-level officers from all three branches are angrily telling President Carlos Menem that his austerity policies are turning the country into a "banana republic." Army nationalist Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, because he said long ago what many of these officers are only now saying, sits in jail today, with a sentence of 20 years to life. He repeatedly warned President Menem and the Armed Forces' high commands that surrender to the Anglo-American strategy to dismantle the military institution would leave the country defenseless and its sovereignty threatened. Menem ignored Colonel Seineldín, and with his anti-military policy provoked the nationalist uprising of Dec. 3, 1990 directed against the Army high command. The high command backed Menem in his harsh repression and treatment of nationalists, and tolerated his demand that the uprising's leaders be put to death or jailed for life.

But now, when leaders of the Armed Forces are telling Menem some of the same things that Seineldín has been saying for years, they are getting pretty much the same treatment that the President meted out to Seineldín. In response to military protests over the austerity conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Menem has told the Armed Forces leadership to "make sacrifices" and not waste time demanding higher wages. Speaking on May 15, he warned that "just as we didn't tolerate what happened on Dec. 3, [1990], we will not tolerate any acts of indiscipline within the Armed Forces." As far as the Argentine President is concerned, anyone who questions his policy is just a rebellious *carapintada*, or "painted face," the term by which the nationalists are known, in reference to the camouflage paint worn by combat soldiers.

Menem issued his warning in response to a series of events over the preceding week. On May 10, the Navy's deputy chief of staff, Vice Adm. Antonio Mozzarelli, told an audience at the Punta Indio naval base that "Argentina is defenseless." Speaking on the anniversary of the founding of naval aviation, he explained that "this is not a sensationalist message, but rather a product of the conjunctural economic situation from which we all suffer." A few days earlier,

retired Brig. Ernesto Crespo, former head of the Air Force under the Raúl Alfonsín administration (1983-89), publicly attacked the government's submission to U.S. State Department and Pentagon demands that the Air Force's Condor II missile be dismantled. To succumb to these pressures, Crespo said, would transform Argentina into "a banana republic." In a subsequent interview, the Air Force officer said that Argentina had "subjugated itself to the United States."

Menem and Defense Minister Erman González moved quickly to punish the outspoken officers. Mozzarelli was relieved of duty and sent into retirement, and Crespo placed under 30 days of house arrest. Menem also ordered the high commands of all three branches to cancel a joint meeting, scheduled for May 14, whose agenda was the economic crisis afflicting the institution. It was the first time such a meeting had been planned since 1983. Menem threatened the military leaders that if they didn't cancel the meeting, he would put Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo on national television to charge that the Armed Forces are greedily demanding a 27% wage increase—equivalent to \$72 million monthly—which could be put to better use for social programs and pensions.

Military wages are at an all-time low, yet Cavallo, a leading asset of the Anglo-American establishment, claims that the increase would disrupt his economic austerity program.

Dismembering the Armed Forces

Menem's strategy of jailing or repressing anyone who disagrees with his policy is only a short-term solution. The high commands of the three branches of the Armed Forces agreed to cancel their May 14 meeting, and to discuss the issues separately; but that is probably only a temporary postponement. Just a few days after Vice Admiral Mozzarelli spoke out, Adm. Emilio Ossés, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked in a public speech that the military institution had suffered "a substantial setback" in recent years, and warned that "the non-existence of the Armed Forces is not a luxury the country can afford."

Army, Navy, and Air Force leaders are enraged that cuts in the defense budget, at the IMF's behest, have reduced the operating capability of all three branches to almost nothing. Military manuals say that an Army with a 30% operating capability is effectively "defeated," yet the Argentine Army estimates that it now has only a 15% operating capability. According to the Armed Forces' own estimates, the current budget of \$150 million represents only 20% of the "historic" defense budget (\$750 million).

With no regard for national security or sovereignty, Finance Minister Cavallo views the Armed Forces as he would any other state-sector enterprise which is slated to be streamlined and privatized under the auspices of the World Bank. He and his military adviser Rosendo Fraga are trying to find a way to officially incorporate the Armed Forces into the

program to "reform" the state sector, in order to reduce the number of active-duty troops, and send soldiers home with unemployment benefits as if they were any other state employee. Menem has also granted the World Bank oversight of the privatization of all defense-related companies, including such strategically vital ones as the Somisa steel complex, the General Mosconi and Bahía Blanca petrochemical companies, and the military industries company Fabricaciones Militares.

Technology prohibited

The Bush administration's efforts to do away with the Condor II missile, which was formerly being developed in collaboration with the governments of Iraq and Egypt, have provoked sharp resistance among Army, Navy, and Air Force ranks, as well as an official alliance between the Army and Air Force high commands. For "tactical" reasons, Navy leaders prefer to steer clear of any public stance which might endanger the "strategic alliance" with the United States, but for most of the rest of the Armed Forces, the outrageous behavior of U.S. Ambassador Terence Todman, in his efforts to get the Condor scrapped, goes beyond the limits of tolerance. The Argentine Armed Forces have a proud tradition of involvement in scientific, technological, and infrastructural development, and view the attack on the Condor II as an unacceptable interference in the country's internal affairs.

For the Anglo-American establishment, elimination of Argentina's Condor has become a test case for successful implementation of its *technological apartheid* policy of denying Third World nations access to advanced technology, under the guise of preserving "democracy" and "regional peace." An article published in the May 13 *New York Times* lamented that the Menem government has failed to exercise sufficient control over the Armed Forces, thereby permitting the Condor II project to continue. After complaining bitterly that Argentine Air Force officials "were able to prevent a team of United States observers from conducting a full inspection of the [missile's] research sites," the *Times* asserts that the real issue is "the President's authority." It quotes a military expert that "I don't think there is a civilian official in Menem's government who really knows what Condor II has."

Nationalists strengthened

The *Times* tries to portray the Condor II, and the military institution itself, as dangerous menaces to the region, in order to justify further assaults on Argentina's Armed Forces. But, as the weekly intelligence sheet *El Informador Público* reported in its May 17 issue, the Bush administration's anti-military policies and the attacks on the Condor II are provoking intense discussion inside the Armed Forces on what the institution's proper role should be, and strengthening nationalist resistance. *El Informador* notes that "the Pentagon

is not pleased with the survival of a nationalist wing in the Army, apparently extended now to the Air Force with a focus on the Condor II, whose purpose is to show that the Argentine Armed Forces cannot and should not 'let down their guard' on matters of national defense." The paper adds that the U.S. is fearful that should nationalists ever take power in Argentina, a 1,200-kilometer-range missile like the Condor could be of real use in any plan to retake the Malvinas Islands.

The current military turmoil is particularly strengthening the group around Colonel Seineldín, whose views have been vindicated by recent developments. In an open letter on the current crisis, reported on in the May 14 daily *Clarín*, Seineldín commented that "the high commands at last appear to be trying to do something for the institution." Vice Admiral Mozzarrelli's statements on the defenselessness of the nation constitute "a small light which is beginning to insinuate itself," the colonel said. "If concretized in a real and sincere way, it will at last address the causes of so many confrontations "within the Armed Forces."

Regional warfare threat

Faced with a nationalist backlash, and uncertainty about Menem's ability to control it, the Anglo-Americans are looking into the option of using regional warfare as a way to smash the Argentine "menace." Argentina and Chile almost went to war in 1978, and, as proven by its role during the Malvinas War, Chile is quite willing to serve as an agent of British interests. In recent weeks, tensions among Chilean and Argentine Armed Forces have intensified over a disputed piece of territory in the Argentine province of Rio Negro on the Chilean border. A border incident in which an Argentine policeman killed a Chilean farmer heightened those tensions.

It hasn't escaped the attention of Argentine military personnel that while the United States, Britain, and Israel are demanding the dismantling of the Condor, they have no problem in supporting Chile's military machine. According to the same issue of *El Informador Público*, the U.S. and Britain are backing the development of a medium-range Chilean missile called the Rayo. The head of the Army, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, has just embarked on an international arms-buying tour, with stopoffs in South Africa, Israel, and the United Kingdom. Military sources in Argentina report that Israel is engaged in building a Chilean aircraft factory which will produce sophisticated bombers, similar to the French Mirage.

On May 13, the Spanish news agency EFE reported on statements by Chilean Navy Adm. Jorge Martínez Busch who asserted that Chile has none of the problems that other Ibero-American nations have, and should therefore be treated as a privileged partner by the United States. Chile is a "leader" Martínez said, which, among other things, "assures it a certain degree of independence in the capability to generate its own weaponry, and maintain its defense industries."