

Argentine military pardoned by Menem

by Cynthia Rush

As anticipated, Argentine President Carlos Menem issued a decree Oct. 6 pardoning military officers accused of human rights violations and of involvement in military uprisings carried out under the previous regime of Raúl Alfonsín. Covered under the decree are 39 officers charged with violating human rights in the late 1970s “dirty war” against subversion; 164 officers who revolted against Alfonsín’s anti-military policies; and 64 leftists who were jailed for subversive activities during the 1970s. The three officers who led the military junta in 1982, and who were responsible for the decision to retake the Malvinas Islands from Great Britain, are also included in the pardon.

Since he took office on July 8, Menem had mooted that he would pardon most of the military officers jailed for these offenses, despite the controversy surrounding the act. The “dirty war” of the 1970s left profound scars on Argentine society. Designed by some of Henry Kissinger’s banker friends as a vehicle to enforce the monetarist economic policy imposed by the 1976-83 military junta, the left-right terror of the “dirty war,” including mass bombings, kidnappings, unauthorized jailings, and disappearances of thousands of citizens, tore families and the country apart. The discrediting of the Armed Forces, an intended result of the policy, was such that social democrat Raúl Alfonsín was swept into office in December 1983 on an openly anti-military platform.

As a major policy objective, Alfonsín’s backers in the U.S. “secret government” apparatus expected him to further emasculate the institution of the Armed Forces, under the guise of “democratizing” it, to render it incapable of resisting plans for the U.S.-Soviet condominium in which the Armed Forces of Ibero-America are slated to be dismantled. A particular target of the Kissinger crowd is Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, a hero of the Malvinas War, and leader of the Army’s nationalist wing. Seineldín had been jailed following the uprising he led in December 1988 in which he demanded that Alfonsín make fundamental changes in military policy and begin to restore dignity to the Armed Forces.

U.S. demands: Crush the military

Through several intermediaries, the Bush administration had put enormous pressure on Menem not to pardon the ac-

cused military officers—especially not Seineldín and other jailed nationalists. The *New York Times* editorialized hysterically on Oct. 10 that Menem’s action represents a “cruel, if expected, blow” to Argentine democracy, and threatened that international financial assistance to the country could be jeopardized by Menem’s failure to rein in the “violent” military. The *Times* lied that the Armed Forces—not the International Monetary Fund’s austerity policies so willingly imposed by Alfonsín—have “most threatened Argentina’s democracy in the six years since the military abandoned power.”

Menem argues, however, that the pardon is a crucial vehicle to achieve national reconciliation, and to heal the wounds of the past. In a Sept. 30 speech in Buenos Aires, he insisted that the country must say “no to revenge, to division and sectarianism . . . no to intolerance reviving old mistakes. And when they say no, the Argentine people are saying yes: yes to the courage of forgiving past offenses, of pacifying spirits, of burying hatreds. . . . [We say] yes to the possibility of putting a better Argentina into motion.”

On Oct. 7, Colonel Seineldín and his family dined with Menem at the presidential residence in Olivos. He was the first military officer to meet with the President following the Oct. 6 decree. On Oct. 11, the government’s Legal and Technical Secretary, Raul Granillo Ocampo, told Reuters news service that the President intends to grant more pardons within a week.

The pardon does not guarantee that all the officers will remain on active duty. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Isidro Cáceres must now review each individual case. A small number of the total group is expected to be passed into retirement, and the rest reassigned.

Menem’s action addresses a number of sensitive issues which have been a source of unrest among the Armed Forces. One is that Army officers tried for human rights abuses contended that they were being unjustly prosecuted for having been ordered to fight a war against Marxist subversion in the 1970s. Except for the officers who ran the military junta after 1976, and individuals such as former Buenos Aires Police chief Ramon Campos and Army Gen. Carlos Suárez Mason—deemed to be the architects of the worst repression—most of the officers who were scheduled to go on trial are now free. Mario Firmenich, former leader of the left-wing Montoneros group, responsible for numerous killings, bombings, and kidnappings, was not included in the pardon, and remains jailed.

The release of Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri, Adm. Jorge Anaya, and Air Force Brig. Basilio Lami Dozo, is also significant. The three had been sentenced for their handling of the 1982 Malvinas War, in effect telling the Argentine people that the nation’s effort to regain sovereignty over the South Atlantic islands should never have been attempted. Argentina’s retaking of the Malvinas set off a wave of nationalism throughout Ibero-America, and threatened to detonate the debt bomb in the faces of international bankers.