

Argentine generals retire Seineldín

by Cynthia R. Rush

The high command of the Argentine Army has completely ignored the recent pardon granted to military officers by President Carlos Menem and forced the retirement of Col. Mohamed Ali Seineldín, leader of the Army's nationalist wing. On Nov. 1, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Isidro Cáceres announced the decision of the Army's Promotions Board that Colonel Seineldín would be retired because he was "unfit to continue in active service." The colonel will also reportedly be subject to 60 days in jail, as punishment for violating specific Army regulations.

On Oct. 6, President Menem granted a full pardon to Seineldín and 180 other officers who had been involved in military action against the policies of Menem's predecessor, Raúl Alfonsín. Also freed from jail at that time were several leftists who had participated in armed warfare against the government during the 1970s. Menem told the Argentine people that the pardon was necessary to achieve the "reconciliation of the nation," whose recent history has been marked by civil strife and economic chaos.

The reasons cited by the Promotions Board for retiring Seineldín are the very grounds on which Menem pardoned him. The board charged him with having abandoned his post in Panama "without authorization," "entering the country clandestinely," and "acting contrary to regulations against the government's military policies."

These charges refer to Seineldín's December 1988 attempt to force the Alfonsín government to reverse its anti-military policies and restore dignity to the armed forces. The colonel left Panama, where he was serving as military attaché and adviser to the Panamanian Defense Forces, and returned to Buenos Aires, where he briefly led troops in a takeover of the Infantry School at the Campo de Mayo Army base, and subsequently at the Villa Martelli Army base. The action was taken to publicize the demand that then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. José Dante Caridi resign his post, and that the Alfonsín government make changes in its policies toward the armed forces.

The action came to a peaceful conclusion, following Seineldín's meeting with General Caridi, who subsequently resigned and was replaced by Gen. Isidro Cáceres. Cáceres was the guarantor of what was called the "Pact of Villa Mar-

telli," an agreement which laid the basis for beginning discussions on how to restore dignity to the armed forces.

Pardon nullified

The effect of the decision to retire the nationalist leader and several other officers is to nullify Menem's pardon of those who, like Seineldín, have fought to defend the institution of the armed forces and the Constitution. There are few officers who can make the claim that the colonel did recently, when he stated that "I have always been a defender of the constitutional order." General Cáceres was forced to admit in a Nov. 2 speech before a group of officers that Seineldín had effectively helped to prevent "the Lebanon-ization of the country."

The only real beneficiaries of the pardon are the terrorists like the Montoneros, who waged savage war against the nation in the mid-1970s, and those officers who "disappeared" thousands of citizens during the same period. An article in the Nov. 2 issue of the Buenos Aires daily *La Prensa* reported that Army nationalists are commenting that the decision to retire Seineldín should "be contrasted with the case of the subversive delinquents, the 'Montoneros,' who, with the pardon, fully recovered the capacity to exercise their rights as citizens, while with the military, the opposite is the case; they are punished for doing their duty."

Seineldín's promotion to the rank of general, for which he was eligible in December of this year, has been the object of an intense fight within the Army during the last year. The nationalist colonel, a hero of the 1982 Malvinas War, is widely respected by especially middle-level officers for his efforts to halt the dismantling of the armed forces demanded by the U.S. "secret government" and Project Democracy apparatus. These latter groupings see the existence of any independent political or military movement in Ibero-America as an obstacle to their "New Yalta" deals with the Soviet Union. U.S. policymaking circles, particularly those associated with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, have lobbied hard for the removal of Seineldín from active duty.

Seineldín has said publicly that he will not contest the retirement order, "for the sake of the unity and cohesion of the Army." The Buenos Aires correspondent for the Mexican daily *Excelsior* reported that Menem is considering naming Seineldín to head up an elite rapid deployment force to combat drug trafficking and subversion. The elite team would reportedly be made up of officers from all three branches of the armed forces.

While there has been no official confirmation of this fact, in comments to the press made on Nov. 5, President Menem emphasized that Colonel Seineldín "was retired by the Army, but not by the Argentine people. He belongs to the people, and if the government needs him, it will require his services." In Argentina, the President said, "everyone, absolutely everyone, is called upon to work for the greatness of the Fatherland and the happiness of the Argentine people."