
Argentina

IMF tells armed forces to disappear

by Cynthia R. Rush

New military unrest has emerged in Argentina over the dramatic economic crisis faced by the armed forces. Funds are often not allocated for basic military operations and base maintenance, and officers and soldiers are forced to work second jobs to make ends meet. Recent wage increases have not alleviated the crisis over funding or wages. Yet, in early June, when an official of the International Monetary Fund met with Economics Vice Minister Carlos Carballo, he complained that the nation's defense budget was too large, and demanded that it be cut.

The Bush administration, and institutions such as the Trilateral Commission, are demanding that Ibero-America's armed forces be dismantled, reduced Panama-style, to a domestic constabulary which can "fight drugs." This plan does not sit well with Argentina's top military brass, but it has been endorsed by President Carlos Menem and Finance Minister Antonio Ermán González.

Reflecting tension over the economic and wage crisis, in mid-June Major José Antonioni of the Eighth Mountain Infantry Brigade unit based in Mendoza accused his superior, Gen. Jorge Apa of the IV Army Corps, of having withheld funds which were supposed to go to the Mendoza unit, and called for the general to be investigated by a Tribunal of Honor. The Mendoza unit had not received any monetary allocations for 45 days. General Apa's decision to relieve Antonioni of his command and impose 15 days arrest for insubordination, was rejected by the entire Mendoza unit. When Apa ordered other mountain units to repress the rebels, they refused to obey his orders. Other units based in the provinces of Córdoba and Santa Fe, indicated they would back Major Antonioni "with action" if necessary.

The incident was finally resolved through the intervention of two top generals, and their agreement to investigate General Apa, who subsequently resigned as commander of the IV Corps. But the economic crisis facing the armed forces is so dire, that further uprisings are expected in coming weeks.

'Don't ask for more'

Menem stated in early June that he would accept no pressures regarding military wages, and that whoever disagrees "can get out." On June 18, speaking on a radio station in the

city of Rosario, Menem told the military command that "the armed forces are not a trade union . . . they have to carry out specific functions and not demand better wages. We're not going to risk the country's economic stability granting funds we don't have."

Political analysts in Buenos Aires estimate that Menem's willingness to implement the IMF's austerity dictates, even if it means dismantling national institutions such as the armed forces, has lost him the support of the Army high command which previously backed him. Finance Minister Ermán González has infuriated the high command by indicating he wants to use the proceeds from the sales of state-run military companies to pay off the foreign debt, rather than to allocate those funds to the defense budget. Recently, Menem publicly insulted Army chief of staff, Gen. Martin Bonnet, after the latter requested that the President move up his timetable for pardoning members of the 1976-83 military junta who have been jailed on various charges. Bonnet was prepared to hand in his resignation, but eventually backed down from publicly confronting the President.

The President's popularity isn't doing too well in other spheres, either. His ratings are plunging in opinion polls, and he has become the butt of jokes in much of the national media and television, which poke fun at his marital problems and his reputation as someone to be avoided because he brings bad luck. But it is Menem's embrace of neoliberalism and harsh fiscal austerity that is the real source of people's anger. Inflation is starting to shoot up again, and there are reports that new austerity measures will shortly be announced. June's inflation rate is expected to be in the range of 15%.

The popular support accorded Menem's estranged wife, Zulema Yoma de Menem, is something of a barometer of national sentiment. The First Lady has been highly critical of her husband's IMF austerity policies and their effect on the poorest sectors of the population. Last month she warned that the country "is going to the devil" as a result of these policies, and predicted they would fail by August. The First Lady is known to maintain friendships with Peronist labor leader Saúl Ubaldini, and nationalist army leader Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, both opponents of the government's economic policies.

In statements published in *Noticias* magazine in May, Mrs. Menem charged that her husband has, in effect, been kidnaped, and is surrounded by greedy individuals who only seek to use him. Shortly after that, Menem signed a decree ordering his wife to be removed from the official presidential residence in Olivos, forcing her to take up residence in a downtown Buenos Aires apartment. After Mrs. Menem moved into her apartment, slogans defending her began to appear on the walls near her apartment building. Zulema Yoma has indicated that she is prepared to expose high-level corruption among the President's closest advisers, and that she will not leave without a fight. "I assure you," she told the June 3 *Noticias*, "if he wants war, he'll get war."