

Drug war provides cover for attack on Argentine sovereignty

by Cynthia Rush

Argentine President Carlos Menem went on national television April 17 to announce a series of anti-corruption and anti-drug measures. Chief among them was the plan to have the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) work jointly with the Argentine Air Force, to begin surveillance and detection of clandestine airstrips on the Argentine-Bolivian border, said to be the major drug-trafficking area of the country. New laws are to be implemented to combat drug money laundering, and to strengthen the country's law enforcement apparatus. Menem went out of his way to assure his audience, "We are telling the world that it is necessary to appeal to all means [of fighting drugs], without this affecting our sovereignty."

A few days earlier, on April 9, Vice President Eduardo Duhalde had announced the creation of a national anti-drug agency and indicated that the Armed Forces would be participating in "intelligence work" in the anti-drug fight—in detecting clandestine airstrips, for example. But the announced collaboration of the Air Force with the DEA came as a surprise. Both Menem and his defense minister, Antonio Erman González—as well as the Air Force High Command—had been opposed to military involvement in combatting drug trafficking. In an April 12 press conference, Menem even asserted that "there is no drug trafficking or money laundering in Argentina," citing the DEA as his source.

The April 17 announcement represents Menem's decision to accede to the pressures exerted over a period of months by the Anglo-American political establishment, to implement its strategic policy goals. This means dismantling the institution of the armed forces and any capabilities for technological and scientific advancement associated with it, while sending in U.S. troops as a replacement to as many countries of Ibero-America as possible. U.S. Ambassador Terence Todman, who seems to be the person really running the Argentine government, assured the media on April 23 that the drug program "will not be like the ones in Bolivia and Peru," adding that "our military advisers won't be arriving here."

Fat chance. Bush's "war on drugs" is the U.S. government's cover for bludgeoning Ibero-American countries into succumbing to the policy of limited sovereignty. It is no accident that Menem's announcement coincided with a renewed U.S. assault on the Air Force, accusing it of secretly continuing to develop the Condor II intermediate-range missile. Under the Bush administration policy of "technological

apartheid," projects such as the Condor II, which was being developed in collaboration with Iraq and Egypt up until April of last year, are considered to be a threat to "regional peace." The Air Force has since its founding been involved in the development of advanced aerospace and rocketry technologies.

It escaped no one's attention that just before Menem went on television, he met with the omnipresent Ambassador Todman, who also met on the same day with Erman González, anti-drug czar Alberto Lestelle, Interior Minister Mera Figueroa, and other cabinet members to discuss the anti-drug strategy.

Besieged with scandals implicating his estranged wife's family, the Yomas, as well as former government officials in drug money-laundering activities, Menem is desperate for Washington's backing. As political commentator Ricardo Kirchbaum put it in the April 22 issue of the daily *Clarín*, "the President is willing to do even more than [Washington] asks in order to be included under the American umbrella."

Kirchbaum reported that in the presidential palace, the Casa Rosada, discussion centers around whether Menem is going to adopt the model of the former head of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega—now sitting in a Miami jail framed up on charges of drug trafficking and money laundering—or of Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a "model of collaboration" with the United States, to the detriment of Mexico's sovereignty. The *Clarín* commentator suggests that even with all his groveling before the U.S., Menem may not be safe from getting the "Noriega treatment" himself.

Kirchbaum also revealed that on April 16, one day prior to Menem's television announcement, Todman and the U.S. Embassy's political attaché, James Walsh, met secretly with Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella, Defense Minister Erman González, Senator Eduardo Menem and cabinet member Eduardo Bauzá, to discuss how to remove "all obstacles to Argentina's relationship to the U.S." The next day's announcement was obviously one of the meeting's outcomes.

Arab interests targeted

There are several factors which make clear that the Bush administration's motives in the Argentine case have nothing to do with fighting drugs. For one thing, virtually every drug-

related scandal which has cropped up over the past three months, and been used to extract Menem's concessions, implicated interests which maintained close ties to Iraq and the Arab world prior to the Persian Gulf war, and opposed both the war against Iraq, and Argentina's involvement in the "coalition."

This is true in the case of the Yoma family of Menem's estranged wife Zulema, some of whose members have been accused of involvement in a drug money-laundering scheme, through New York, Buenos Aires, and various European capitals. The family has maintained business contacts in Iraq, and during the war, Zulema Yoma, a Muslim, harshly attacked Menem for siding with the United States against an Arab nation. Zulema's sister Amira, her ex-husband Ali Ibrahim, and brother Karim have all been named as suspects in the money-laundering scheme. Until recently, all had served in the Menem government in top posts.

The evidence for the Yomas' alleged money laundering, now under investigation by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón, is based on the testimony of a "repentant" drug trafficker named Andrés Ignacio de Iglesias Cruz, jailed in Madrid. The Spanish weekly *Cambio 16* began publishing Iglesias Cruz's story on the Yomas some weeks ago, and has maintained almost weekly coverage of the case.

The Yomas may be guilty as charged, but that is not why the Bush administration is highlighting the case. It intends instead to punish any group which opposed the slaughter against Iraq, while at the same time ramming through its own economic and strategic agenda. A similar operation is under way in Venezuela, where individuals who opposed the anti-Iraq policy of President Carlos Andrés Pérez are being smeared in the aftermath of the war.

During the third week of April, Argentine media named additional individuals of Arab extraction, some of whom had been appointed to posts or received political favors from Menem, as being involved in new drug scandals. In a recent issue, *Cambio 16* went so far as to report that Menem's teenage son Carlos Saúl was a personal friend of Mario Anello, a drug kingpin with ties to the Medellín Cartel, who is currently a fugitive from justice. For two days, until the Spanish Foreign Ministry corrected it, the Europa Press agency circulated the report that President Menem had named Anello to be the Argentine delegate to Spain's Expo '92 fair.

CIA, Mossad involved

The Spanish weekly magazine *Tiempo* reported on April 8 that the campaign against the Yoma family originated with the CIA and the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad, because of the family's relationship with the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. A number of other facts bear out this assertion.

Last fall, it was Ambassador Todman who first unleashed the uproar over "corruption" in the Menem government, in the scandal known as "Swiftgate," which ultimately led to

the resignation of presidential adviser Emir Yoma. Simultaneously, a gaggle of individuals who are identified with the Mossad and with the U.S. intelligence community jumped on the bandwagon, pointing the finger at the Yomas and at other individuals linked to the Menem government. The accusers include Jacobo Timerman, an asset of the Mossad and the U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL); "leftist" Rogelio García Lupo, a founder of the Cuban press agency Prensa Latina who echoes the Bush administration line against the armed forces; and Patricio Kelly, a well-known agent of the Mossad, whose major pastime is waging campaigns against political enemies, charging them with corruption and involvement in drug trafficking.

According to the April 14 daily *Clarín*, the repentant drug trafficker Iglesias Cruz, whose testimony is the basis for the charges against the Yomas and several others, is probably a DEA informant. While the DEA responded with a "no comment," the charge is coherent with the intense pressures the agency has put on the government to implement Bush's anti-drug strategy. The DEA is firmly backing up the investigation into the Yoma family by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzón, while demanding that Menem take steps to immediately crack down on money laundering, or face "big problems."

The weekly *El Informador Público* reported on April 19 that both the DEA and the Mossad are accusing the Air Force of using 10% of all drug money laundered through Ezeiza Airport to secretly finance and continue to develop the Condor II missile behind the government's back. The DEA is also behind a series of accusations that the Air Force failed to halt contraband and drug money passing through customs at Ezeiza, over which it had jurisdiction. The government has acceded to the U.S. demand to open an official investigation into the charges.

During an April 18 cabinet meeting, as reported by the April 19 *Clarín*, Foreign Minister Di Tella delivered a message from the U.S. government to the effect that if Argentina didn't finally kill the Condor II missile, the Bush administration would cut off all financial assistance to the country. The ministers present all agreed that U.S. demands must be met. Last year, when the government agreed to cancel the project, the U.S. raised the possibility of some kind of compensation or alternative deployment of the technology developed, the investment in which is close to \$300 million. But now, as the daily *Página 12* reported on April 20, this idea is a dead letter. The U.S. "really wants to 'destroy' and not transform the Condor missile," the newspaper noted. "The verb 'destroy' is literal: They want to demolish the Falda del Carmen installations [site of the project] and all those related to the missile."

To this end, according to Ricardo Kirchbaum, Ambassador Todman showed up one day recently at Foreign Minister Guido Di Tella's office accompanied by an expert in "missile destruction."