

Menem throws elderly on the scrapheap

by Cynthia R. Rush

It is with good reason that two Argentine bishops have identified the economic policies of President Carlos Menem as "un-Christian." His free market austerity and privatization program, carried out under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is literally killing people, especially the young and the elderly—those least able to defend themselves as the country's living standard plunges downward.

In September, hundreds of retirees gathered every Wednesday in front of the national Congress in downtown Buenos Aires to demand that the government increase their monthly pensions to at least \$450. The current average monthly pension stands at \$250, although many receive as little as \$150. Even \$450 is insufficient, since the cost of the monthly market basket comes close to \$1,000.

The plight of the elderly has become such that, according to a Sept. 25 report from the U.S.-based Spanish-language television station Univisión, 14 retirees committed suicide in the four weeks prior to that date. Family members of the victims reported that the suicides were caused by feelings of desperation over economic problems. On Sept. 24, *La Nación* reported that in a two-day period, five young people in the province of Córdoba also committed suicide, due to psychological depression over economic problems.

Two Catholic bishops have condemned Menem's economic policy in the harshest terms. In statements made Sept. 20, Bishop Jaime de Nevares of Neuquén described the conditions of poverty and unemployment in his province, arguing that growing poverty in the country is like an open wound. "There is an infected wound which someone wants to cure with a bandaid. You don't see the wound because it's below the surface, and putrid." In an open letter to Menem published Sept. 16, Bishop Miguel Hesayne of the southern Argentine city of Viedma said that "you present yourself as a Catholic, but your policy is condemned by Jesus Christ. . . . Your plan generates misery among those who were already poor, and continuously impoverishes those who had achieved a certain level of well-being." Hesayne recommended that Menem re-read the Bible, "upon which you took your oath as President."

According to a report in the Sept. 27 *Página 12*, this lack of morality was also addressed some months ago by the Sicilian magistrate Giovanni Falcone, just prior to his assassination by the mafia. Falcone had visited Argentina at that time to warn that in the face of Italy's offensive against

it, the mafia might be planning to relocate its intelligence apparatus to Buenos Aires "because it offered all the conditions for a refuge."

During that visit, Falcone stated his concern that Argentina's mass privatization of state companies, a part of the IMF program, offered a vehicle for the laundering of drug revenues, and told the press after meeting with government officials: "I have the feeling that they're only interested in investments coming in, without asking where the money comes from. . . . They don't understand how dangerous this is, because today, tomorrow, or in a year, 20 mafiosi together in a country become the mafia."

The only thing that Menem had to say about the suicides of pensioners was that "the index of suicides is normal. . . . If you analyze the number of elderly suicides in any part of the world, you see that the numbers here are normal." In his Sept. 18 speech, he claimed that elderly demonstrators in front of the Congress were "unrepresentative" of the nation's 4 million pensioners. In a speech Sept. 23, Menem insisted that "the poor are not bearing the brunt of the economic adjustment."

Poverty in Argentina

Yet, there are indications everywhere of deepening poverty in a country which should be one of Ibero-America's industrial powerhouses. A report in the Sept. 25 *La Prensa* indicates that real wages have dropped 10-16% over the past 12 months. The study done by the Argentine Business University (UADE) showed that the average wage can only cover 40% of the monthly market basket. Pensions have suffered a real decline of 16% over the same period. Arnaldo Cisilino, executive director of the National Social Security Administration (Anses) reported on Sept. 28 that 65% of all retirees will not be eligible for pension increases slated for Oct. 1.

On Sept. 24, government Housing Secretary Alberto Biagosch resigned because there are no funds available to finance housing programs. Moreover, if a plan put forward by Finance Minister Domingo Cavallo is approved, the provinces will lose close to \$200 million which is supposed to be allocated for housing. Cavallo wants to make monthly deductions from the National Housing Fund (Fonavi) to make payments on the foreign debt rather than on housing for the provinces.

Argentina once offered the finest medical care and health infrastructure in Ibero-America. Today, outbreaks of infectious diseases which were once eradicated are common. A meningitis outbreak has occurred in the populous province of Buenos Aires, with high concentrations in the poorest areas. Despite a general breakdown in Argentines' health, a government decree passed Sept. 15 blocks the accounts of public hospitals, making it impossible for them to carry out any financial transactions. During a Sept. 26 protest of 5,000 doctors, speakers charged that the decree will effectively deny Argentines free medical care at public hospitals.