

Argentina's Menem backs Britain's war

by Cynthia R. Rush

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher still has blood on her hands from the 1982 war with Argentina over the Malvinas Islands. Thatcher punished Argentina for having the audacity to retake the Malvinas and challenge Britain's colonial policies. She took her revenge in acts such as personally ordering the sinking of the cruiser *General Belgrano* in May 1982, violating Britain's own stated rules of engagement—the ship was moving away from the exclusion zone which had been established around the islands—needlessly sending 323 sailors to their deaths.

Every Argentine knows that Britain has always considered this nation to be part of the British Empire. No one has forgotten the brutality of Britain's actions during the 1982 war. Yet now, President Carlos Menem has made the decision to back Thatcher's colonial warfare in the Mideast. On Sept. 18, Foreign Minister Domingo Cavallo announced that two Argentine Navy vessels and two transport planes, with a total of 300 crew members, would be going to the Persian Gulf to participate in the blockade against Iraq. Bypassing the constitutionally mandated need to seek congressional approval for such a decision, the Argentine President claimed that the ships and planes constituted a "peacekeeping force" for which congressional approval was unnecessary.

The decision has caused an uproar inside the country. Every political party has denounced the move, and according to one opinion poll, at least 70% of the population opposes it. Zulema Yoma, Menem's estranged wife, stated that she was "saddened and ashamed" by the decision, adding that the crisis should be resolved by the Arab nations. On Sept. 19, Menem narrowly averted disaster when the majority opposition in Congress nearly voted on a bill declaring his order to send troops illegal. Only the fact that a few Peronist party deputies walked out, leaving the chamber without a quorum, saved him.

New security doctrine

The Peronist President remains unfazed by the opposition. Since he took office, he has placed the demands of the Bush administration and the Anglo-American Establishment above national interests. This has meant not only imposing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) economic austerity, to guarantee foreign debt repayment, but dismantling the institution of the Armed Forces for the purpose of replacing it with a small, national guard-type structure which could

participate in Bush's phony war on drugs, or deploy according to foreign needs.

Since April of this year, the United States has pressured Argentina intensely to abandon its traditional "hypothesis of conflict," based on maintaining its defense capabilities in the event of a military conflict with its neighbors. The U.S. Southern Command's Gen. Maxwell Thurman visited Argentina in May to demand that the government cut the military budget, reduce troop strength, and redeploy troops in the anti-drug war. At the same time, the government complied with Washington's request to scrap the Condor II missile project, which Argentina had been developing together with Iraq and Egypt.

Cavallo's press conference made clear to what degree Menem has complied with Bush's demands. "With the end of the Cold War," he said, "there is a new system of international security being created and we want to insert ourselves into that process. . . . Instead of preparing for a war with our neighbors, or applying themselves to the development of non-conventional weapons, as has occurred in the recent past, our Armed Forces now have active participation in this new international security system as their hypothesis of conflict."

One South American diplomat told Brazil's *Jornal do Brasil* newspaper that Menem's decision to send troops means "an automatic alignment with the United States." Cavallo affirmed this when he echoed the Anglo-American argument against technology transfer to developing-sector nations. Menem's decision, he said, was coherent with "the decision to respect the rules that inhibit nations from proliferating nuclear and non-conventional weapons."

Political backlash

The Sept. 20 *Financial Times* of London reported frankly that Menem's decision to send a token force to the Gulf "will distract Argentina's politically restless soldiers from domestic affairs . . . the troops' activities in the Gulf will have the added virtue of distracting public opinion from the country's severe economic problems." That is not likely. Menem is already extremely unpopular precisely because of the IMF policy he has imposed. Following the Sept. 17 announcement of the troop deployment, the jokes which have been circulating in the country ridiculing Menem intensified.

The President has a reputation for causing bad luck, to the point where no one mentions his name for fear that that alone is a bad omen. People refer to him as "Mendez," and on the day after the announced deployment, graffiti appeared near the presidential palace reading, "Mendez, you get crazier every day." Dante Caputo, the former foreign minister under the Alfonsín regime, who is not exactly known for his good looks, told the media that "if this is a peacekeeping force, then I'm Robert Redford." Caputo and the opposition Radical Civic Union (UCR) are calling for Menem's impeachment for violating the Constitution and international law.