
Ibero-America

Menem spearheads Bush's assault on Argentinian Armed Forces

by Cynthia R. Rush

"If they kill him, something much worse will be unleashed here." This was the headline which appeared in several Ibero-American newspapers, from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, during the last week of December, highlighting the statements made to *EIR* by Mrs. Marta Labiau de Seineldín. Mrs. Seineldín is the wife of Mohamed Alí Seineldín, the nationalist leader and Malvinas War hero who opposes the Anglo-American policy of dismantling the institution of the Armed Forces being carried out by Argentine President Carlos Menem. Along with 14 other officers, he is being tried in Buenos Aires as the "promoter and ringleader" of the Dec. 3 uprising of Army nationalists.

In her exclusive interview with *EIR* below, Mrs. Seineldín explains the real reasons behind the uprising, pointing to the failure of Carlos Menem and his predecessor, Raúl Alfonsín, to keep agreements made with nationalist military leaders to resolve the Army's internal problems. The Menem government's repeated provocations over the past 18 months against what Mrs. Seineldín describes as the nationalist "combative army," whose goal is to serve the Army and nation, are what finally led to the Dec. 3 uprising. The Ibero-American press made a point of emphasizing Mrs. Seineldín's remarks that the uprising was the result of the conflict between the "combative army" and the "administrative army."

On and immediately following Dec. 3, Menem insisted that the Army nationalists intended to overthrow his government and kill him. Citing support for him from the Bush administration and the "international community," he followed Henry Kissinger's logic and had Defense Minister Humberto Romero instruct the military prosecutor trying the officers to ask for the death penalty, to make a "horrible example" of anyone who challenged his policies. He demanded summary trials and quick verdicts. He shrieked that those who had organized the rebellion were nothing more than common criminals and fringe elements.

The real story gets out

But beginning on Dec. 24, the Mexico City daily *Excelsior*, Panama's *El Periódico*, Peru's Lima-based *El Comercio*, and the Buenos Aires dailies *Clarín* and *Ambito Finan-*

ciero, countered Menem's version of events with the EIR News Service press release announcing the interview with Mrs. Seineldín. Each paper quoted her warning that the nationalist phenomenon inside Argentina's Armed Forces was "not finished," and that worse disturbances can be expected if Menem continues with his anti-military policies, or executes nationalist officers.

Several papers extensively quoted Mrs. Seineldín's description of the inhuman treatment given the jailed Army nationalists, as well as the warm support offered her by the Argentine public. She explained that the *Carapintadas*—"painted faces" as the nationalists are known—had no intention of overthrowing the government on Dec. 3, as Menem has charged. Their goal is to fight for an Army which can serve the nation with dignity.

Ibero-American press also emphasized that EIRNS possesses documentation, included in this issue, on the Anglo-American establishment's strategy to dismantle all of the continent's armed forces. The military in virtually every Ibero-American nation is under attack from the Bush administration and other advocates of a "New World Order," who argue that with the end of the Cold War, Ibero-America needs no militaries.

This policy has provided a tremendous boost to communists, narco-terrorists, and assorted ecological terrorists who are active in El Salvador, Peru, and Colombia, but who eye the entire continent for takeover. Brazil's Armed Forces are particularly targeted, as indicated by a commentary in the Dec. 19 *Christian Science Monitor*. Argentine journalist Robert Windhausen lauds Menem's fierce repression of military nationalists, noting that this will send a message to Brazil "where discontent is spreading among officers over what they call 'free falling salaries.'" Windhausen predicts that the crushing of Seineldín and the *Carapintadas* in Argentina "may discourage" the Brazilian military from acting.

Menem's plans backfire

The continent-wide publicity given Mrs. Seineldín's statements, combined with developments inside Argentina, have forced Menem to backtrack on several fronts. After first screaming for the death penalty, he proclaimed in more

subdued tones during a Dec. 27 breakfast with reporters that he would not tolerate "a single execution in the Argentine Republic." Menem admitted that "there are some sectors of the community which have asked me to be more flexible," and added that in any case "it will be a good while before we get to the sentences . . . this situation could go on until the middle of next year." Originally, the President had demanded that verdicts and sentences be made known before the end of 1990.

The continuing crisis in the Army is one factor in this abrupt about-face. Indicative of this was the bombshell dropped by military prosecutor Gen. Carlos Domínguez on Dec. 20, when he recommended to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the military court trying the nationalist officers, that Colonel Seineldín and four others be sentenced to death for leading the Dec. 3 rebellion.

In his statement before the court, Domínguez harshly attacked the country's military and political leadership, and warned that further disturbances are inevitable if policy changes aren't made. He accused political leaders of "irrational hostility and ill will toward the Armed Forces," saying that their attitude was responsible for "sowing internal discord in the military."

General Domínguez charged the Army high command with a lack of "leadership and professionalism," adding that "if the high command doesn't modify the serious intolerance which has characterized much of its action, the tremendous pain caused by these deaths [if the death penalty is carried out] will have been in vain, and the Army will be lost forever." The general criticized the Army leadership's functioning during the 1982 Malvinas War, and during the 1970s war against subversion, referencing "repressive excesses" and "some acts of corruption among not a few of its members."

The prosecutor's statements were the first occasion on which such a high-ranking military officer has spoken out publicly in this way, in effect confirming many of the charges made by the *Carapintadas*. The Army's deputy chief of staff, General Balza, called the prosecutor's statements "despicable" and the high command decided to retire the general as soon as the trials are over. A few days before Christmas, the high command also decided to "purge" the Army, sending 57 officers and 647 non-commissioned officers into retirement or stripping them of rank. Five officers whose units rebelled on Dec. 3 have been relieved of duty, and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Martín Bonnet has announced that the institution will no longer tolerate indiscipline or dissidence. Anyone who doesn't follow orders is out, he said.

But this doesn't change the reality of General Domínguez's statements. Several reports issued inside Argentina warn that another Army uprising could occur anytime after the first of the year. On Dec. 14, Navy Chief of Staff Adm. Jorge Ferrer stated publicly that this branch of the service is facing its worst crisis "in a century." It is known that even among the Armed Forces' top leadership, there is opposition

to the government's plan for "restructuring" the institution, drastically reducing its size and operational capability.

Death penalty debate

Menem suffered another setback on Dec. 27, when the Supreme Court ruled on the matter of whether military or civilian courts should try the Army nationalists. While it determined that military courts would try the accused officers, it countered Menem's desire to charge them with "insurrection," a crime which under military law carries the death penalty. Instead, the Supreme Court charged them with "insurrection in ideal concurrence with rebellion," thus defining their crime as political in nature and eliminating the possibility of a death sentence.

The Argentine President's decision to grant pardons to members of the 1976-83 military junta, jailed on charges of human rights violations along with the terrorist Montenero leader Mario Firmenich, has also opened a Pandora's box of problems for him. Menem has been especially defensive about press reports that the pardons are the result of a deal with the Army high command, and that he is rewarding Firmenich for the financial and political support his left-wing political group gave Menem's 1989 electoral campaign.

Menem claimed that the pardons, quietly implemented on Dec. 29, are a means to "reconcile" Argentine society and heal the wounds of the past. But he can hardly justify putting Army nationalists like Seineldín to death because they oppose his subservience to the Anglo-American establishment, while absolving the likes of Firmenich or former head of the First Army Corps, Carlos Suárez Mason. The popularity of the measure is not increased by the fact that it also includes Henry Kissinger's old buddy, former Finance Minister José Martínez de Hoz, who was not jailed but who still had several legal cases pending against him for his role in destroying the nation's economy from 1976-81.

Most of these jailed individuals are hated by Argentines, who associate them with the years of violence, corruption, and needless deaths which occurred during the 1970s. Firmenich's Monteneros group recruited thousands of young people during that decade, and used them as cannon fodder in a guerrilla war against the Armed Forces and the nation. Recent polls show that 70% of the population generally oppose the pardons, and over 80% oppose Firmenich's release. As soon as the news of their release was made public, citizens took to the streets to protest.

The Anglo-American press also opposes the pardons, but for different reasons. They view the action as a dangerous "concession" by Menem which gets in the way of their policy of dismantling the military. The *Washington Post* made this clear in its Jan. 1 editorial. Commenting on the Dec. 29 pardons, it stated that the greatest threat to Argentina "is this strange military establishment. . . . It is difficult to think of any country on Earth with less need for large and aggressive armed forces."