

Argentine siege: in whose defense?

by Cynthia Rush

On Nov. 3, voters in Argentina will go to the polls to elect, or re-elect, members of that country's house of representatives. The elections are considered to be a major political test for President Raul Alfonsín. He and the candidates of his Radical Civic Union (UCR) have staked their reputations on the "Austral plan," the orthodox monetarist program dictated by the International Monetary Fund last June as a conditionality for Argentina receiving fresh credits from the international financial community. At a time when other Ibero-American governments—Colombia, Brazil, and Peru—are bucking the IMF, the UCR government and its candidates have made Argentina's submission to the IMF the basis of their political platform.

Observers in Buenos Aires say that this submission and the need to have a good showing at the polls prompted Alfonsín to take dramatic political action during the week of Oct. 20. On Oct. 23, the government issued Decree 2049, authorizing the arrest of 12 individuals, including three active-duty military officers said to be implicated in bombings and acts of terrorism which had plagued the country during the previous month-and-a-half. Twenty-four hours later, following a federal judge's ruling the decree unconstitutional, the government imposed a 60-day state of siege.

Interior Minister Antonio Troccoli explained that the measure was necessary to defend democracy from a group of right-wing plotters, who, with international assistance, were attempting to destabilize the Alfonsín government. Defense Minister Roque Carranza charged that some of those on the detention list were linked to the notorious P-2 Freemason lodge and to the drug-linked sect of Reverend Moon. The Oct. 26 edition of the Rio de Janeiro daily *Jornal do Brasil* reported that Brazilian, Uruguayan, Israeli, and U.S. intelligence had been called upon by Argentina's national intelligence service (SIDE) to help hunt down ex-general Guillermo Suárez Masón, a fugitive from justice wanted for human-rights violations, and one of the 12 names on the government's wanted list.

Given Argentina's history of political terrorism over the past 10 years, the measures met with a favorable public response. *The New York Times*, which normally attacks any-

thing remotely smelling of "militarism," on Oct. 29 leaped to Alfonsín's defense, explaining that "Mr. Alfonsín, a democrat, has acted on behalf of democracy. Freedom-lovers elsewhere can only hope that his dramatic action will be both brief and successful."

But the picture inside the country was not quite as the *Times* would have it. The networks named by Troccoli and Roque Carranza—P-2, Moon, and the drug mafias—certainly do operate in Argentina, and are unquestionably responsible for acts of violence. But they also flourish in the environment created by IMF policies. As long as the Alfonsín government remains committed to these policies, it will never dismantle terrorist and drug-trafficking networks.

The state of siege declaration and arrests unleashed a political and legal furor, the end of which is not in sight as of this writing. There is a state of heightened unrest inside the armed forces, where relations with the government are already strained as a result of the trials of nine former military junta members for violations of human rights. Of the three active-duty officers arrested, Col. Pascual Guerrieri occupied an important position in the office of the Army General Staff. The government did not bother to inform the Army Secretary General, Gen. Ríos Ereñú, of its intention to arrest three officers. Upon learning of the arrests, Ríos issued a telegram to all army units in the country denying that he had provided any information on other officers to the government, and immediately visited the military detainees in jail.

'Austral plan' the real problem

Sources in Buenos Aires report that leaders across the political spectrum are highly dubious about the state of siege, and see it as a blundering attempt to frighten the population into backing the Austral plan at the polls.

Peronist Sen. Vicente Saadi, first vice-president of the Justicialista Party, charged that the Alfonsín government itself was behind some of the recent bombings and bomb threats in urban centers, citing evidence implicating leaders of the UCR's left-wing youth group, Franja Morada. Government forces "are preparing a military purge," Saadi warned, "a purge to send into retirement and brand as totalitarian and authoritarian, those officers who do not wish to pay the price imposed by the United States, by the issue of the Austral plan and the International Monetary Fund, which demand the de-Malvinization of Argentina."

Also addressing the underlying cause of the problem, the Peronist-run labor federation, the CGT, is discussing new action against the unemployment and wage deterioration caused by the plan, and business sectors are urgently demanding that Alfonsín begin "phase II" of the plan, which is supposed to be the "reactivation." Humberto Volando, president of Argentina's Agrarian Federation of small- and medium-sized agricultural entities, warned on Oct. 22, "The lids would blow off, if measures were not taken soon to reactivate the economy." The Austral plan, he said, "places in jeopardy the stability of the democratic government."