

Military unrest adds to Argentine crisis

by Cynthia R. Rush

Despite Argentine President Carlos Menem's denials that there is any possibility of "social explosion" occurring in his nation as a result of his monetarist economic policies, incidents of unrest are occurring on a regular basis in different parts of the country, each time with greater intensity. Now, the March 21 death of Army Chief of Staff Gen. Isidro Cáceres throws a new element into the crisis; the general chosen to replace Cáceres is reportedly prepared to follow in his predecessor's footsteps, backing the government's unpopular economic programs, and, if necessary, directing troops to repress a population which is both angry and hungry.

Given that the military is wracked by its own internal conflicts, these steps could have dangerous repercussions. General Cáceres, who served as Army chief of staff since July 1989, was an important representative of the military faction which backs the International Monetary Fund's economic policies, and rejects demands by Army nationalists for changes in policy toward the military. With Menem's backing, Cáceres was determined to purge the armed forces of nationalists, and blamed Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, the visible leader of the nationalist faction, for what he termed "lack of discipline" within the Army. Seineldín, who led a December 1988 military action to force the social democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín to change its policy toward the Armed Forces, has been repeatedly slandered by the Bush administration and Henry Kissinger's friends as a coup-monger, because of his defense of institution of the Armed Forces.

On the same day that Cáceres died, and knowing that Menem would be naming a new Army chief of staff, Seineldín issued a statement addressing the Army's internal situation, warning both military and government leaders that a failure to resolve disputes in a reasonable fashion, could be dangerous. In the convulsed period in which the country is living, he noted, "the people look again to their Army as the ultimate guarantee of safety and preservation of institutional order for national harmony." However, he added, since the institution is shaken by internal disputes, if it is called upon to act, "it could split into opposing factions, just like the society to which it belongs, and thereby constitute, not the ultimate recourse to maintain the reign of law, but an additional factor in the crisis."

Colonel Seineldín, who has attracted the political support of Peronists and nationalists angered by Menem's embrace of economic liberalism, also called on the Army command to stop imposing disciplinary sanctions on nationalist officers, in violation of the presidential pardon issued last October. "This state of affairs must cease," the document states. "It is imperative to restore the authority of the hierarchy through personal example . . . and, in the Army, through a command based on 'reason and justice,' which will naturally lead to restoration of discipline, confidence and loyalty between the upper echelons and their subordinates. . . . Today, more than ever, the unity of the Argentine Army is necessary to maintain national harmony."

Menem turns a deaf ear

From all indications, Menem intends to ignore Seineldín's proposal. He has named as the new Army chief of staff Gen. Martín Félix Bonnet, who previously served as Cáceres's second-in-command, and is committed to his predecessor's policy. On March 22, even before Bonnet took over his duties, the high command placed Seineldín under arrest for 30 days, allegedly because his statement violated military discipline.

These provocative actions will not only intensify unrest within the Armed Forces; they will weaken the institution generally, at a time when national institutions are crumbling, and incidents of strikes, looting, and violence are increasing.

Citizens enraged by the government's economic policy and the breakdown of society are taking matters into their own hands. In the northern province of Tucumán, policemen who were suspended because of "indiscipline," immediately went out on strike and took 30 top officers hostage. As of March 22, the hostages were still being held and the police headquarters were surrounded by troops of the national gendarmerie.

Top labor leaders affiliated with the Peronist-run General Labor Confederation (CGT), have officially broken with the Menem government. According to the March 16 *Financial Times*, CGT leader Miguel Correa publicly branded the President "a traitor." Hugo Curto, a senior official of the powerful Metalworkers Union, said that Menem's program is "not only against workers' interests but against those of the Argentine people."

On March 21, close to 100,000 state sector workers went out on strike to protest Menem's plans to privatize the sector. The 24-hour action was reportedly almost 100% effective, shutting down the national airline, schools, government offices, and state companies. Court workers have just begun their second 72-hour strike over wage demands, and the Supreme Court has called Finance Minister Antonio Erman González in to explain why wages of judicial workers are so low. The announced shutdown of the Renault auto plant in Córdoba and the Autolatin auto plant will mean that thousands of autoworkers will lose their jobs.