

# Argentine military faces 'restructuring'

by Cynthia R. Rush

Just days after crushing an uprising by Army nationalists who opposed his military policy, Argentine President Carlos Menem announced on Dec. 7 a sweeping "restructuring" of the Armed Forces. In obedience to the Anglo-American establishment, which views the existence of the institution of the Armed Forces as an obstacle to its strategic goals, the plan will dramatically reduce the size of the institution, merge activities which are now handled separately by the three branches of the service, and reportedly focus on a "new strategic conception characterized by deterrence." According to a report in the Dec. 11 *Folha de São Paulo*, the plan's centerpiece, the creation of a rapid deployment force "of reduced magnitude and greater mobility" will be overseen by U.S. military advisers—Panama-style.

The reform is intended to destroy the Armed Forces' identity as an institution which defends national sovereignty and fosters scientific and technological development. Menem's "new Armed Forces" will serve the Bush administration's "democratic" agenda, and repress any force which might oppose it. In his press conference, Menem explained that the Armed Forces will "serve negotiation, influence in crisis management, be instrumental in regional integration, and contribute to the country's insertion into an international framework." The Armed Forces must also be prepared to "repel the external or internal invader," he said.

The new measures will disperse forces now concentrated at the huge Army base at Campo de Mayo in Buenos Aires, long a center of opposition to anti-military policies. Its training schools will be relocated to the outlying provinces of Corrientes and Entre Rios, and 3,000 hectares of Campo de Mayo will be sold. Troops will be selected from the three branches and sent to the far-southern region of Tierra del Fuego to form a joint command. Operations of the Navy and Air Force will also be reduced, and several of their bases sold. Military academies will be privatized, and a common budget devised to cover operations of the Defense Ministry, and military and security forces.

Menem had planned to unveil the reform on Dec. 3. After that day's military uprising, and the rushing of over 600 detainees into summary trials, he proceeded to launch a

witchhunt against all anti-government opposition and to announce the military reform a few days later. For months the Argentine President had ignored the grievances of the nationalist faction led by Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, who opposed his plan to dismantle the Armed Forces and his acceptance of the austerity policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Instead, Menem staged one provocation after another, which finally resulted in the Dec. 3 action. Now Menem is demanding the death penalty for the leaders of the rebellion, claiming that these "alienated" individuals are "responsible for Argentina's frustration, stagnation, and failure" and boasting they have been "totally eradicated from the Armed Forces."

## 'Democracy' consolidated?

That is wishful thinking. As indicated by the composition of those who participated in the Dec. 3 uprising—over 70% of them non-commissioned officers—discontent within the Armed Forces is widespread and is not going to simply disappear because Menem says so. Adm. Enrique Ossés, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke on Dec. 10 of the "degree of deterioration of the military institution, which over the past decade has experienced an unprecedented regression." There is significant unrest over the issue of wages, and the institution's inability to maintain even minimal operations because of budget cutbacks.

Menem wanted all the participants in the Dec. 3 uprising to be tried by military justice and to receive harsh penalties, including death. But on Dec. 11, a Buenos Aires federal court ruled that civilian justice has jurisdiction in the case and should try both military men and civilians now under arrest. The Dec. 11 edition of *Ambito Financiero* pointed out that this decision, which could be reversed by the Supreme Court, will prevent Menem from obtaining two goals: ensuring that the accused are summarily tried, and imposing the death penalty for the rebellion's leaders. Civilian justice prohibits the application of the death penalty.

Also, after declaring on Dec. 5 that he would personally initiate the investigation of business groups suspected of financially backing the Army nationalists, Menem is now backtracking to say that no action will be taken against businessmen unless and until there is "definitive proof" of their involvement. The government's Legal and Technical Secretary, Raul Granillo Ocampo, has noted that it would be extremely difficult to prove such participation in a court of law.

Menem is boasting that his government has been strengthened by the Dec. 3 uprising, and received international backing. But in provincial elections held Dec. 11, the "Menemista" Peronists lost in three provinces, trounced by local provincial parties. This, combined with the fact that protest marches against corruption in many of the Peronist-run provincial governments continue, indicates popular disgust with the way the country is being run.