

Argentine nationalists get harsh sentences

by Cynthia R. Rush

On Jan. 8, after a month of deliberations, the Supreme Council of the Argentine Armed Forces announced sentences for 15 nationalist Army officers who participated in the military rebellion taken last Dec. 3 against the policies of the Army high command. Malvinas War hero Col. Mohamed Ali Seineldín, who was charged with being the "instigator and promoter" of the uprising, along with six other officers, received the maximum sentence of an "indefinite" jail term. Under the military justice code, an indefinite jail term cannot be for life; however, prisoners can request parole only after serving 20 years. Six other officers received terms of between 12 and 20 years, and two were completely absolved. All of the officers were stripped of their rank.

The defendants have five days to appeal the sentences to the military courts, and their cases will automatically be appealed to the Buenos Aires civil federal court beginning in mid-March. This court can request further investigation of the case, expand interrogation of the defendants, and increase or reduce their sentences.

The Dec. 3 action, which lasted one day, came after months of provocations directed against Army nationalists by President Carlos Menem. Menem had repeatedly refused to address grievances or to respect previous agreements made with nationalist officers to resolve the Army's internal problems. Although the military court backed away from imposing the death sentence originally requested by Menem, its harsh sentences are intended as a message to anyone who might challenge the President's subservience to the Anglo-American political establishment, which demands the dismantling of the Armed Forces. Colonel Seineldín is an outspoken opponent of these policies.

According to one press evaluation, the outcome of the military trials was crafted in such a way as to constitute the maximum insult to the officers' military identities, and especially to put Colonel Seineldín "in his place." Known for his personal integrity and principled defense of the institution of the Armed Forces, the colonel is feared by Menem's Anglo-American allies, who would like to see him dead.

Originally, the court charged him with being the primary leader of the Dec. 3 action, but subsequently characterized him as only an "instigator and promoter," while accusing a lower-ranking officer, Capt. Breide Obeid, of being the key leader. The court determined that the 15 officers acted as a group, in which military hierarchy was not a factor, conclud-

ing, in effect, that they might as well have been a band of common, civilian criminals. The court's message was that there were no important military issues involved in the Dec. 3 action.

Menem shaky

The problems inside the Armed Forces and Menem's dealings with their leaders won't be resolved by punishing and purging nationalists. Right now, the Argentine President faces a very tricky situation, stemming from his Dec. 29 pardon of former members of the military junta which ruled from 1976-83, along with guerrilla leader Mario Firmenich, former junta Finance Minister José Martínez de Hoz, and a few other civilians. The former junta members were jailed on charges of human rights violations related to the 1970s "war against subversion." Their release was said to be the result of a deal with the Army high command, which is still extremely sensitive to charges that its leaders carried out a "dirty war" and committed terrible atrocities in the name of fighting subversion.

Menem described the pardons as a means to achieve the "reconciliation" of Argentines. Instead, his measure has provoked an uproar domestically and internationally. Human rights groups which have supported the government's assault on the institution of the Armed Forces, begun by former President Raúl Alfonsín, are enraged; and the crisis inside the Army has been exacerbated by statements made by former junta President Gen. Jorge Videla upon his release from prison. Apparently violating an implicit "pact of silence," Videla released a letter to Army Chief of Staff Gen. Martin Bonnet demanding vindication for the Army's role in the 1970s, adding that an apology to the military institution was still pending.

The high command considered Videla's letter an affront to its leadership; but it also fears that the former junta leader will rally disgruntled officers who think that the institution's current leaders haven't done enough to defend it.

The Anglo-American establishment is also worried. So far, Menem has obediently implemented their strategies to "restructure" the Armed Forces out of existence. But now, as a Jan. 1 UPI release revealed, they're worried that Menem won't even be able to stay in power. Videla's statements show that the Army wasn't mollified with the pardons, UPI reported, and that Menem "is gambling that the Army will give him a reward: his political survival."

The Bush administration is well aware that discontent inside the Argentine Army has not dissipated, following Dec. 3. According to the Dec. 28 issue of the daily *El Informador Público*, U.S. military advisers in Buenos Aires estimate that middle-level and non-commissioned officers will back any future movement to defend the Army. They also note that there is "massive opposition" among the high command itself to Menem's military restructuring program, which could reduce active duty troops by 40%.