Argentina’s Dirty War Essay, Research Paper

Argentina’s Dirty War

Between 1976 and 1983, under military rule, thousands of people in Argentina were arrested and then vanished without a trace. This campaign became known to Argentina and abroad as the “Dirty War”. Seized by force against their will, the victims no longer existed as citizens. Nobody knew who exactly were responsible for their abductions or even why they had been abducted. Under a policy called the “Process of National Reorganization”, successive juntas waged war against armed guerrillas and unarmed civilians. The guerillas were defeated, but the torture, disappearance and murder of innocent civilians continued for several more years thereafter. The authorities had no record of these desaparecidos. Unimaginable time went by and innocent parents and children made endless attempts to try to locate their loved ones. Fear spread throughout Argentine society, and many were afraid that they would become the next innocent victims.

From the beginning of the seventies through the present, military regimes have declared wars on the peoples of Latin America, backed by the doctrine of national security. This doctrine was adopted in order to fight the “communist threat” and allowed for the extermination of complete generations in order to prevent “foreign ideologies” from taking over the countries. The estimated number of people killed in The Dirty War was about 15,000. Thirty thousand more were imprisoned under inhumane conditions, including extreme torture, and half a million citizens were exiled. The subversion and terrorism produced by the military resulted in these arrests, abductions, tortures and disappearances of people who had never participated in violent or armed attacks. The military targeted academics and over three thousand university professors were dismissed from their posts and many of them were arrested on charges of subversion during the first six months of military rule. Amnesty International reported on the disappearances of two hundred intellectuals and students. Another favored target was journalists who dared to report on disappearances or criticize the regime in any way. Psychiatrists were also considered dangerous because they were believed to support subversion, offer criticism of society and encourage “free thinking.”

The descriptions of pain-wracked bodies revealed that the supposed quest for national security actually resulted in the destruction of the physical integrity of the people who were supposed to be protected from a dangerous threat. Most of the victims lived the remainder of their lives in detention centers and were blindfolded and forbidden to talk to one another. They were beaten, tortured sexually, electrically shocked and almost drowned. Most of those who survived the torture were killed. The bodies were buried in mass unmarked pits, or thrown out of planes over the sea. The outrageous number of descriptions of torture demonstrated the hypocrisy of the regime’s claims to be protecting security while violating the bodily security of thousands. Although the military targeted professors, students and psychiatrists, they frequently abducted persons whose only evidence was being listed in the address book of a person previously abducted.

Prior to its departure from power and transition to democracy, the forth and final military junta published the “Final Document on the War against Subversion and Terrorism,” in which the military admitted that some abuses of human rights were committed, but that they were justified because they were carried out by military personnel in the line of duty. The junta also enacted the “Law of National Pacification, ” granting immunity from prosecution to suspected terrorist and to every member of the armed forces for crimes committed between May 25, 1973 and June 17, 1982. Despite the self-amnesty, in 1983 the new civilian president, Ra?l Alfons?n, issued an executive decree ordering the arrest of the members of the first three military juntas for crimes defined by the legal code in place while they were in power. Defense lawyers argued that crimes the military was accused of committing had been if fact legal, because they had been ordered by an executive decree passed by the constitutional government that had remained in effect during this Proceso. By the middle of 1984, victims’ friends and families had filed over 2,000 criminal complaints against the military. Trials for junior officers were in process, but Alfons?n gave in to military pressure, and agreed to put a stop to military prosecutions and passed the law of “due obedience.” The law of due obedience presumed that officers were legitimately following orders and therefore declared all offenders to be innocent. In 1990 President Carlos Menem pardoned about 280 members of the military who still faced trial for human rights abuses. Victims, families of victims and human rights activists were justifiably horrified by the due obedience law and the pardons. The establishment of truth commissions and the publication of their reports it vitally necessary in order to refrain history from being repeated. In 1995 a handful of former officers have come forward to confess their crimes and have called on their colleagues to do the same. If human rights violations are rationalized once in the name of the pursuit of national security, they can be again. It is then important to hear the victims’ stories of inhumane torture to prevent it from happening ever again. There are a handful of human rights organizations that work against the injustices that was caused by the Dirty War. H.I.J.O.S. is an example of a human rights organization that unites the sons and daughters of the disappeared during the last military dictatorship in Argentina. The objective of HIJOS is so that justice can be brought to those responsible of the crimes mentioned earlier. HIJOS demands the annulment of the law named “Obediencia Debida” which is a law that frees all the law-rank officials who perpetrated crimes following orders f higher-rank officials. There is also another law which is called “Punto Final” which limited the charges against the members of the military dictatorship. President Carlos Menem also signed the amnesty-decree through which all those who were condemned were set free. HIJOS views these three legal instruments as unconstitutional because they violate international agreements on crimes such as these. Argentina faces legal challenges in Spain and Italy to bring former Argentine military officers to justice for past human rights abuses. A French court has already sentenced a former Argentine Navy officer in absentia to life imprisonment for his involvement in the killings of two French nuns. Spanish court has issued international arrest warrants for former President Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri and 10 other high-ranking Argentine officers. Spanish law allows the prosecution of genocide no matter where it is committed and regardless of the nationality of those accused. General Galtieri is said to be responsible for the killings of four members of a Spanish family in 1976 in Rosario, Argentina. According to Spain, if Argentines are unwilling to come to terms with its past, Spain is willing to do it for them. Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon has investigated the torture and disappearance of 600 Spanish citizens in Argentina. Although investigation has been called upon by countries other than Argentina, human rights lawyer Pedroncini concedes that the odds are slim that any pardoned officers will wind up in jail.

However much some want to put the past behind, move on and forget about the injustices that took place during this time period in the Argentine society, many can and will never forget. To this day the “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” demonstrate in that square before the presidential palace, demanding the truth about their vanished children. It is interesting to now focus on how the “disappeared” or “desaparacidos” were symbolized by society then as well as after the return of democracy. It is now presumed that these “desaparacidos” were long killed by their captors and torturers, but as long as there was no body and no official recognition of their deaths, they cannot die. The mothers of the Plaza de Mayo can still be seen, since their movement in 1993 (ten years after the transition to a democratic government), dressed in black demonstrating every Thursday at 3:30 in the afternoon in the famous Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. Marching around the statue of liberty, they used to tie white handkerchiefs imprinted with names of disappeared sons and daughters, around their heads, and carry signs with photographs of missing people whose destinies they sought information. The mothers are a symbol of courage and such dedication that has been demonstrated represents leading the struggle for justice. Another human rights organization along with Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and HIJOS is also the Grandmothers of May Square or Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. Like the other human rights organizations, Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo helps locate the disappeared children. This organization works on four different levels; denunciations before national and foreign governments, and before the judiciary, as well as advertisements in the press directed to the general public and personal investigations. After years of searching, 58 disappeared children were located which 8 had been killed. Of the remaining 50, 33 are already with their

legitimate families and others are in close contacts with their grandparents, with their true identity and history restored to them by court orders. Some of these cases are still in process in the Justice Department however. The Grandmothers receive help from technical teams, integrated by professionals in the fields of justice, medicine, psychology and genetics.

In conclusion, The military regime that was subsequently set up has itself made use of extreme violence. Thousands of persons have vanished without trace, and in many cases we know that they have been brutally treated and put to death. All of this has been carried out under the cover of complete silence, without semblance of legal procedure. This has disrupted the lives of men and women who have nothing in common with terrorism. This is an extreme example of what can happen when all controls are lost. The Argentine people are anguished over the fate of the many infants who were kidnapped or have been born in captivity. These kinds of events have created in Argentina a crisis that is not only political, but also moral and spiritual. In order for Argentina and its people to move forward and not commit the same mistakes and repeat history, it is vital that appropriate measures be taken to punish those rightfully wrong and prevent anything like this from occurring again. The mothers and grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and other human rights organizations such as HIJOS is a perfect example of what can be done when people work hard for justice and work toward a better future. Overall, people must never forget what happened.

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