

Argentinean priests charged with murder of prisoners in dirty war

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Buenos Aires--An Argentinean human rights group has charged that Roman Catholic priests cooperated with government officials in the murder of political prisoners during that country's so-called "dirty war".

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo rejected official church condemnation of the murders saying that ecclesiastical officials knew what was happening and sympathized with the military's conservative political goals.

Monsignor Emilio Bianchi de Carcano said on March 7 that no Christian could condone murders committed by Argentina's former military rulers. He denied that church officials had been consulted or had given any sort of approval to the actions.

Argentinean naval captain Adolfo Scilingo had accused church officials of providing justification for the torture and murders of dissidents during the late 1970's when nearly 4,000 people were killed and 9,000 disappeared at the hands of a right-wing government. Scilingo said that between 1,500 and 2,000 detainees were thrown alive into the ocean from Navy and Marine airplanes.

Scilingo said that the commander of the naval operations had consulted with ecclesiastical authorities to seek justification for their actions. Military chaplains acted as counselors for officers distressed by what they were doing, the military official said. "The chaplains comforted the officials after each flight with Biblical parables" Scilingo told investigating authorities.

Monsignor Bianchi de Carcano said "We are able to affirm, to assure with complete certitude, that the episcopacy was never consulted about such a way of killing people or anything like that."

Bianchi de Carcano said that the church officials asked the military for information about the fate of political prisoners, but military officials never offered a clear reply.

Hebe de Bonafini, director of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo rejected the church statement saying, "The Church has a great responsibility in everything that happened, because the Church knew that the military chaplains were paid salaries of investigating judges to participate and act in the jails extracting confessions from the prisoners."

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo group said that the actions of the military chaplains were an "embarrassment to humanity."

Two bishops have begged for forgiveness for any involvement in the killings by the church hierarchy.

Meanwhile, church officials say that secret records which the church possesses regarding the dirty war will be opened in 30 Years.

"This is the general norm for the church," said the archbishop of La Plata, Monsignor Carlos Galan. "The Vatican archives are opened 50 years after the death of the pope involved," he said.

"We are going to see that the church did not hide nor was it involved in the acts, nor did it plant terror in any way," said Monsignor Justo Laguna.

The head of the Argentinean Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic), Cardinal Antonio Quatrain said "neither the Argentinean episcopacy nor its authorities were consulted about the legality or viability of the charges that it participated in the deaths of those detained, nor that it gave any form of advice."

Human rights groups have appealed for publication of the names of people murdered, but military officials say that no list of those murdered or missing exists, thus they cannot provide it.

Meanwhile, reports from Uruguay say that dozens of bodies washed up on Uruguayan beaches during Argentina's "dirty war" were buried in unmarked graves. Local newspapers report that all the bodies showed signs of torture.

Argentinean priests charged with murder of prisoners in dirty war,
Compass Direct, March 12, 1995