

ARGENTINA - Hunting Down the Triple A Death Squad

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Monday 26 February 2007, posted by [Manuela Garza Ascencio](#)

IPS - The renewed investigation into political crimes committed by the Triple A "para-police" group in Argentina in the 1970s is finding fresh evidence and information daily, and is shaping up into a major case of crimes against humanity.

"Every day new victims and relatives and members of leftwing parties or organisations are coming forward," federal prosecutor Eduardo Taiano, who was responsible for reopening the investigation that lay buried for nearly two decades, told IPS. "Many of these cases had never been reported to the criminal justice authorities before," he said.

Taiano argued in late 2005 that the Triple A, the now-defunct ultra-rightwing Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, had committed crimes against humanity, which are not subject to any statute of limitation.

Federal Judge Norberto Oyarbide, who was presiding over the case at the time, ruled in favour of Taiano's argument, and the investigation was reopened. There are three suspects, and several victims a day are being added to the case.

"Just today I took a statement from a trade unionist belonging to a socialist party, who in those days was the target of three attempts on his life by the Triple A. Afterwards he fled the country, and today for the first time he came forward to make his complaint," said Taiano, who envisages a flood of similar cases.

A few minutes after the interview, the Justicia Ya (Justice Now) network, made up of the Centre of Professionals for Human Rights (CEPRODH) and more than 10 other organisations, presented to the justice system 683 cases of people executed between 1973 and 1976.

This was a period of democratic rule preceding the military dictatorship (1976-1983) which murdered thousands of civilians and forcibly "disappeared" 30,000 more.

The lawyers remarked that this list is only partial, as it remains open to new complaints. It includes murders never reported before as well as high-profile cases like the assassinations of leftwing Peronist deputy Rodolfo Ortega Peña, and of Marxist intellectual Silvio Frondizi, the brother of former President Arturo Frondizi (1958-1962).

Their petition to Oyarbide includes taking measures to identify both the killers themselves and those who planned and ordered the murders.

Juan Domingo Perón, who founded the eclectic movement officially called the Justicialista Party in the mid-20th century, had been elected president of Argentina for the third time. His personal secretary José López Rega set up the clandestine Triple A organisation, made up largely of off-duty police officers, while he was minister of social welfare.

Perón died on Jul. 1, 1974, and the vice-president, his third wife María Estela Martínez, a former cabaret dancer better known by her artistic name, Isabelita, stepped in. She was overthrown by the armed forces on Mar. 24, 1976.

During that period the activities of the Triple A became even more brutal.

Lawyer Myriam Bregman, of CEPRODH, told IPS that investigations of Triple A crimes had been deferred because of the large number of trials for human rights violations that occurred during the dictatorship.

The latest depositions will be added to 15 lawsuits presented so far this year on behalf of some 40 victims. In January, the Communist Party filed complaints on behalf of members killed by the Triple A, and in February the Workers' Socialist Movement reported 15 murders and one disappearance that occurred in 1974 and 1975.

Lawyer Marcelo Parrilli, one of those who presented the Workers' Socialist Movement case, told IPS that although the executions of members of the movement had been publicly announced at the time they occurred, this was the first time that the criminal justice system had been asked to act.

This week the Workers' Party presented three cases of murders of its activists in 1974, and the Liberation Party also reported that the bullet-riddled bodies of two of its activists were found in 1975 in an empty lot on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

Taiano said that the Association of Former Detained-Disappeared, the Argentine League for Human Rights, the University of Buenos Aires professors' association and other groups had come forward as litigants, but had not yet given details of the victims they would represent.

The prosecutor said the trial was likely to take on huge dimensions, and he predicted that the various litigants would have to try to join their complaints together into one suit.

Recent investigations allege that Perón approved the creation of the Triple A as a parallel entity to eliminate leaders and members of leftwing parties, social organisations and trade unions, and to neutralise radical leftwing factions within his own Justicialista (Peronist) party.

An appendix to a file at the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), created in 1984 to record the reports of kidnapping, torture and forced disappearance committed during the dictatorship, lists the cases of victims of Triple A crimes and extrajudicial executions that occurred prior to the 1976 coup d'état.

The CONADEP list includes reports of 1,170 victims of such cases occurring between 1966 and 1976. Of these, 1,122 were victims of forced disappearance or extrajudicial executions that took place between 1973 and 1976.

Among the most notorious crimes committed by the Triple A were the shooting of Ortega Peña in front of his house, and the murder of then deputy chief of the federal police Julio Troxler.

The Triple A is also accused of the murder of Jesuit priest Carlos Mugica, who espoused liberation theology and was active in the Third World Priests' Movement. He worked tirelessly alongside slum-dwellers, and supported the left wing of the Justicialista Party.

Lawyer Miguel Radrizzani Goñi lodged the first accusation against the Triple A in 1975 when he asked for a judicial investigation into the organisation headed by López Rega. But so little progress was made on the case that it was not until 1986 that the former minister was arrested.

López Rega spent three years behind bars before he died, and the case was closed. It was reopened in December 2005 thanks to prosecutor Taiano, and a year later it began to build momentum. In December 2006, former assistant police chief Rodolfo Almirón, who had belonged to the Triple A, was arrested in Spain.

In January former police chief Juan Ramón Morales, another leading member of the organisation, was arrested in Buenos Aires. Felipe Romeo, editor of the ultra-rightwing magazine *El Caudillo*, which was financed by advertising contracts from the ministry then headed by López Rega, was also taken into custody.

But the greatest stir has been created by the extradition order against former president Martínez (Isabelita), who is living in Spain, where she is now in custody. The first warrant was issued by a federal judge in the western province of Mendoza, and Judge Oyarbide followed suit a few days later. Martínez is being held in Madrid under house arrest because of her age and poor health.

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