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Argentina: Investigation into "disappearances" - a step towards settling outstanding debt from "dirty war"

The judicial decision to intensify investigations into the fate of "disappeared" children by ordering the detention of the former head of Argentina's first military junta is a step in the right direction in tackling the outstanding debt of the country's "dirty war", Amnesty International said today.

Jorge Rafael Videla was army commander and President of the military junta in Argentina between 1976 and 1981. His detention on the instruction of federal judge Roberto Marquevich on 9 June, in relation to the illegal adoptions of five children abducted by the security forces whose parents "disappeared" between 1976 and 1978, opens new hopes to establish the fate of thousands of "disappeared" in Argentina.

Over the years Amnesty International has campaigned on behalf of the "disappeared" and has consistently appealed to successive democratic governments to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for this crime.

Article 20.3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances establishes that: *"The abduction of children of parents subjected to enforced disappearances or of children born during their mother's enforced disappearance, and the act of altering or suppressing documents attesting to their true identity, shall constitute an extremely serious offence, which shall be punished as such"*.

"The impunity surrounding the crimes against humanity committed under successive military governments, have allowed the perpetrators to remain unpunished and the right of the victims and their relatives to the principles of justice and truth to be ignored," Amnesty International said.

Background Information:

During the period of military rule (1976-1983) in Argentina thousands of people were abducted by the security forces and "disappeared". The *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP), National Commission on Disappeared People, appointed in 1983 by the new civilian government, listed 340 secret detention centres and recorded 8,960 cases of "disappearances" warning that the true figure might be higher. Cases of pregnant women who gave birth in secret detention centres was also included in the CONADEP report. Their babies were taken away and given to childless couples connected to the armed forces or police to raise as their own.

New evidence of the systematic involvement of the armed forces in human rights violations during the military government has continued to emerge. The most recent, in January 1998, involved statements made by former frigate captain Alfredo Astiz which confirmed other revelations made by members of the armed forces in recent years concerning the crimes committed during that time. The crimes in question include the abduction and "disappearance" of about 200 children who are still being sought by their relatives and the Argentine non-governmental organization "Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo".

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