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General (Q) Distribution

*Thin like*  
*You have already seen, but*  
*may like to glance at again, before our*  
*talkback dinner. Points that strike me are:*

ARGENTINA  
15 November, 1979

SUBVERSION, REPRESSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN ARGENTINA

*The British Chargé d'Affaires at Buenos Aires to the*  
*Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*

*apparent sympathy with USSR. (note Argentina is not restricting grain supplies)*

SUMMARY

In September the OAS Human Rights Commission visited Argentina where the tradition of political violence dates back to Perón's first administration, and has intensified in the last decade. The protagonists, and examples of guerilla action (paragraphs 1-4).

*and b) the influence of the Pope.*

2. The authorities' harsh response, the human cost, and the fate of the disappeared. The largest guerilla movement in Latin America since Castro seized power ruthlessly crushed (paragraphs 5-9).

3. The international reaction to events in Argentina; less swift and severe than in the case of Chile, partly because of deliberate restraint by the Soviet bloc, but growing in strength. The Pope's recent criticisms will carry weight (paragraphs 10-14).

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*[Signature]*

4. The arguments over the war against subversion, and the hard road back to normality (paragraphs 15-19).

5. Conclusions about the effectiveness of foreign criticism. Her Majesty's Government should continue to express concern about individual cases. The OAS report is due out in early 1980 (paragraphs 20 and 21).

(Confidential)  
Sir,

Buenos Aires,  
15 November, 1979.

In September 1979, the OAS Human Rights Commission paid a visit to Argentina, at the invitation of the Argentine Government, to investigate alleged human rights abuses in this country. This despatch considers the background to the subversion and repression which led to the Commission's visit, the present situation, and prospects for the future.

The Historical Background

2. The history of political violence and repression in Argentina in recent years is inextricably bound up with the country's political development since 1945. Under the first Peronist administrations (1946-55) an authoritarian system

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of government was imposed upon the country under which the judiciary, the Press and the individual were all subject to the whim of the State and its representatives. During this period, the authorities employed the methods of torture and even murder in order to stifle opposition. Following the overthrow of Perón in 1955, the tradition of violence in Argentine politics declined for a while, but returned to the fore during the late 1960s and early 1970s when a series of non- or anti-Peronist civil and military administrations ran the country. Encouraged and to a certain extent directed by Perón from his Madrid exile, a number of his followers turned to acts of political violence in order to put pressure on the Government to call elections and permit his return. Their violent methods were designed to demonstrate that the State could no longer guarantee the safety of its citizens, and included bombing, kidnapping and assassination. The ideology of these exponents of violence was confused, varying from extreme Right-wing nationalism to different forms of Marxism.

3. *The protagonists of violence.* Little by little the authorities were drawn into responding in kind. Perón's eventual return in 1973, itself the occasion of a large-scale airport gun battle between rival groups of supporters, proved a disappointment to many of his followers, who were frequently at loggerheads with each other. Even before his death in July 1974, it was clear that certain political and/or urban guerilla groups had turned against him, and following the succession of his politically ineffective widow, a minor but vicious form of civil war had begun. The main protagonists were, on the one hand, the police aided by a number of extreme Right-wing para-military groups, some sponsored by Señora de Perón's Government. A well-known example was the Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina). On the other side were ranged a number of guerilla organisations of which the most important were the Trotskyite Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) and the Marxist/Nationalist Montoneros, the armed wing of the Peronist Youth Movement, whose ideology was a confused blend of Marxism and extreme nationalism. The guerillas, whose operations were frequently funded by the kidnap and ransom of expatriate businessmen working for multinational companies in Argentina, chose as their target the establishment—high military and Government officials, police and figures of authority.

4. *Some guerilla operations.* The following are some examples of the more notorious terrorist operations:—

29 May, 1970: Montoneros kidnap and subsequently murder former President Aramburu, justifying this act on the grounds that Aramburu had authorised the execution of Peronist counter-revolutionaries in 1955.

19 September, 1974: Montoneros kidnap the brothers Jorge and Juan Born, directors of the Argentine multinational grain company, Bunge y Born. The brothers are eventually released after the payment of what is believed to be a record ransom of US\$ 20 million.

31 July, 1975: Charles Lockwood, an Anglo-Argentine businessman, who had formerly been kidnapped by the 22 de Agosto group and subsequently ransomed, is again kidnapped, this time by the ERP. He is released a month later when a special police patrol searching for weapons, stumble upon his captors' hide-out.

27 August, 1975: Montoneros destroy a Hercules transport plane with a remote-controlled bomb placed on the runway of Tucuman military airfield, killing five members of the Gendarmerie.

23 December, 1975: The ERP make a frontal attack upon the army barracks in Monte Chingolo, province of Buenos Aires, involving over 200 members of their organisation, the majority of them students. (The army had been warned in advance of the attack which proved suicidal for the guerillas, 80 of whom were killed.)

18 June, 1976: General Cardozo, the Chief of Police, and his wife are killed by a bomb placed under their bed by Ana Gonzalez, a Montonera friend of their daughter.

5. *Repression.* By mid-1975, the growing unrest had induced the armed forces to intervene in order to crush the guerillas. (They took full control of the country in a coup in March 1976.) They elected to fight a "clandestine and deniable" war, whose most notable tactic was the "disappearance", in which a suspect was seized by unidentified armed men, interrogated, often under torture, and then either re-surfaced or, more usually, imprisoned or secretly murdered. By mid-1977, these brutal methods had proved successful; and the largest and the best organised guerilla movement in Latin America since Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba had been ruthlessly crushed.

6. The cost of this repression in terms of casualties is impossible to estimate with accuracy. The security authorities probably lost some 1,500 men, and the guerillas and their sympathisers probably lost 10-12,000. A further 4-6,000 were held in detention, and some 20-25,000 found it prudent to leave the country. (In order to put these figures in perspective, at the height of their power in the autumn of 1975, the guerillas' strength probably numbered 3-4,000 ERP and 4-5,000 Montonero activists, with a further 4-5,000 and 20-25,000 active sympathisers respectively.)

7. Between mid-1977 and mid-1979 the authorities gradually released many of those imprisoned, and they probably now hold 1,500 to 2,000 detainees. They also took steps to publish the names of detainees in all but a minority of cases in which they considered that security considerations made such a course unwise. But enquiries as to the whereabouts or fate of the disappeared met with a stone wall of official silence. Inevitably, a number of foreign nationals or dual nationals, particularly Italians and Spaniards, were among them. In Britain's case, we have two cases of disappearance (both UK citizens), and one young dual national (Miss Daisy Hobson) sentenced to twenty-two years in prison.

8. *Miss Hobson.* Daisy Hobson, who has been in prison since 1976 and is now aged 28, was one of the most capable Anglo-Argentines of her alienated generation. The winner of a British Council award for the best A level result in South America (never taken up), she had won dozens of cups for show jumping and held a seven handicap at golf. We have made many representations on her behalf and should continue to do so with the view to securing her eventual release. In addition, representations about our three cases provide Her Majesty's Government with the opportunity to express, when required, a more general concern.

9. *The disappeared.* Most of the several thousand disappeared must be, to use a phrase of General Viola's, *desaparecidos para siempre* (for good). The truth about how they have been done to death is now beginning to be published. Here it may suffice to record a slang expression—*la pileta* (the swimming pool, the sea where weighted corpses have been sunk). But not all the disappeared are

dead. A number are being detained for re-indoctrination by the military while others are living abroad under assumed names. (For instance, a former Dutch Ambassador told me he had issued a false passport to the revolutionary son of a family connected with Holland.) Others are in limbo. An Argentine lady living at Córdoba once begged me to find a safe place for one such unfortunate, her son. He had been a terrorist, she said, robbed a bank, eventually been arrested, broken by the police and then obliged by them to interrogate and brutalise other prisoners. The police would not let him go as he knew too much. If he ran away, they would hunt him down and, if he fled abroad, his former comrades now in exile would execute him for treason. His only haven lay in the Falklands, she said.

### International Reaction

10. *Contrast with Chile.* For a long time the excesses committed by the Argentine security forces drew little attention from the outside world, a contrast with Chile where the 1973 *coup d'état* by General Pinochet found immediate and widespread condemnation. There were two reasons for this: Allende's administration enjoyed considerable popularity among liberals and socialists in the Atlantic world and also had close ties with the Soviet Union. Pinochet's Chile, with which Communist governments (other than the Chinese) broke off relations, has suffered accordingly. In contrast, the administration of Señora de Perón enjoyed little understanding or sympathy in the US and Europe and only a weak relationship with the Soviet Union. As a result, the bloodless coup of 24 March, 1976, in Argentina neither incurred international hostility nor led any country to break relations with Argentina. Also, although the Videla administration is avowedly anti-Communist, it has built up a solid trading partnership with the Soviet Union, and has never been attacked by Communist governments, their international front organisations or by Soviet sympathisers in the west.

11. *Shielded by the Soviets.* It is ironic that the Argentine Communist Party receives noticeably lenient treatment from the authorities here. It is in any case tolerated. It is instructive that in Britain the Argentine Government is attacked not by the CPGB but only by liberal radicals and the "new left". It is a paradox that the Argentine military dictatorship should have been protected, from what might otherwise have become extremely severe international pressures, by the Soviet Union and its allies. I hope that this paradox can be publicised at an appropriate time.

12. *Western criticism.* Eventually, however, the repression in Argentina, on a bigger scale and more prolonged than in Chile, provoked a critical reaction in the US and Western Europe. There has been much criticism of Argentina in the parliaments and Press of Western Europe, particularly in those countries such as France, Spain and Italy where many of the country's political exiles have settled, and a cooling of relations with most EEC governments. This state of affairs has not, however, had a serious effect upon economic relations with Western Europe and several important industrial contracts have been won, notably by West Germany for frigates and a nuclear plant. Our French friends have even brought off the astonishing left and right of selling Mirages both to Argentina and to Chile.

13. *The US arms embargo.* In the case of the US, the Videla Government had the misfortune to come up against the global human rights policy fostered by

President Carter. As seen from Buenos Aires, the Carter Administration appeared to wish to make an example of Argentina as proof of its sincerity in championing the cause of democratic liberties throughout the world. In this, the Administration received the active support of a number of liberal or opportunistic politicians such as Senator Edward Kennedy, who co-sponsored the Humphrey-Kennedy Amendment of October 1977 banning arms sales to Argentina on the grounds of human rights violations. The hostile attitude assumed by the American political establishment has been wounding to the Argentine Government, who believe that they have been shown insufficient understanding or sympathy by their natural and most important ally.

14. *The Pope.* While many Argentines may publicly profess unconcern about foreign criticism, the country's human rights record has contributed to Argentina's international isolation. Their profession that foreign criticism is the ill-informed product of exiled terrorists' propaganda is not without a grain of truth. But this argument is unpersuasive in the face of such powerful critics as the Pope who, in October 1979, made public reference to human rights in Chile and Argentina and also told the Argentine Cardinals that the problem of disappearances must be cleared up. His voice may prove to be the most weighty and effective form of international pressure.

#### **The Arguments over the Subversive War**

15. *The Government case.* The authorities argue that their opponents chose to fight a "dirty war" and that it was only by employing the same methods that they could contain and overcome the threat. That the insurgents were guilty of murder, extortion and torture, is probably sufficient reason in the eyes of most Argentines for the manner in which they were suppressed. The fact that from exile the insurgents have fomented a publicity campaign directed against the Argentine Government, and that organisations such as Amnesty International have occasionally been uncritical in their acceptance of information from such biased sources, has enabled the Argentine authorities to allege that the campaign is politically motivated and that the rest of the world began to notice human rights violations in Argentina only when the insurgents began to lose ground and after the military took power. They claim, with some justification, that the hostility towards the Government directed from abroad is due not so much to the methods they used in combating the urban guerillas, as to the fact that they are an avowedly Right-wing military administration.

16. *Critical views.* Critics of the Government make counter-arguments. While admitting that the urban guerillas chose to live by the sword, and in that sense there can be no complaint that many of them died by it, they point to the many innocent people who have suffered at the hands of the authorities and to the widespread abuse of their power by the security forces. They stress that the Government have made no move to reveal the fate of thousands of disappeared persons, leaving their relatives in a state of cruel uncertainty, and that many who have disappeared had no connection with the guerilla organisations, but are victims of error, personal vendetta, or even common crime. Above all, they maintain that, during the 1975-79 period, middle-ranking officers and even NCOs acted as jury, judge and executioner in the cases of hundreds, if not thousands, of the dead. Some of them claim that elements within the armed forces hoped to use the anti-guerilla war to establish an authoritarian and military State on a semi-permanent basis.

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17. *A judgment.* The truth lies between the two extremes. The authorities were faced with the problem of how to combat a highly developed, well-armed and abundantly financed guerilla movement. In the circumstances of Argentina in 1975, their claim that unconventional warfare was called for may well have been right. But they sometimes went beyond the requirements of crushing the guerillas, and acted above the law in many respects. A thriving cottage industry developed in the disposal of the property of the disappeared; torture became standard practice; little or no concern was shown for the relatives of the disappeared; many personal scores were doubtless settled, and political murders carried out. (Perhaps the most dangerous information which any Argentine can possess is about how the armed forces have, on occasion, forced arrested terrorists to disgorge funds from bank accounts in Switzerland. Such information is believed to have caused the murder in 1978 of Elena Holmberg, a career diplomat who had served in the Paris Embassy.)

18. There is little doubt that the counter-subversive war has now been won, and the majority of senior military officers are looking for a return to normality, however divergent their views on the country's political future. Considerable progress has been made towards controlling the more extreme elements within the security forces and maintaining law and order through more conventional methods. This process will, however, take some time. The deaths in Buenos Aires this autumn of two of the most wanted Montonero activists—Horacio Mendizabal and Armando Croatto—who had a grisly record of assassination and torture, and subsequent attacks on two junior Economic Ministers (Walter Klein and Juan Aleman), provide abundant justification for those (such as General Menendez) who argue the need for constant vigilance and the maintenance of a clandestine security apparatus. The Montoneros may have been beaten, they say, but are still capable of occasional operations, and the authorities should use their proven methods to protect the State.

**Future Prospects**

19. Even if terrorist activities and disappearances ceased tomorrow, the return to normality would not be a quick or an easy process. Thousands of families at every level of society have been directly affected by the ruthless methods used in the war against subversion. (For example, the Secretary for Industry, a Catholic intellectual, recently told me that his younger brother was one of the disappeared.) Even though the practical difficulties that flow from the disappearance of a close relative may be eased by Law 22068 of 12 September facilitating the legal presumption of death and the consequent pension and inheritance matters, there will remain the bitter, unanswered questions of how, why and at whose hands the disappearance occurred and what right the Government has to declare him or her dead. On the other side of the fence, there are thousands of members of the security forces who know only too well what happened, who are unrepentant about their part in such events, but who must fear that one day stones may be lifted and the facts revealed. This sense of collective responsibility among the Officer Corps is strong (and deliberately induced), and frequently officers remark that "there will be no Nurembergs here". The probability is that the horror of the war against subversion and of the disappearances will remain for years as a looming but officially unacknowledged presence at the back of the political stage. It could even emerge as a major public issue in Argentine politics. In any case, only political skill and time may be able to exorcise it.

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**Conclusion**

20. Against this background, strident foreign criticism of Argentina's human rights record is not likely to be productive—quite apart from any exacerbating bilateral issue, such as the Falkland Islands. The recent investigation by the OAS Human Rights Commission stimulated a wave of nationalistic sentiment, expressed in numerous statements from all manner of organisations, to the effect that Argentina needed no one to tell her how to run her own affairs. However, the Commission's visit may in the longer term turn out to be something of a landmark in the grim history of Argentine politics. The fact of the Commission's visit was in itself a tacit recognition by the authorities that all is not well in this field; and there is at least the possibility—to judge by some reported remarks by individual Commissioners—that the Commission's report will make the inevitable criticisms in terms more measured and balanced than, for example, the Amnesty International report of 1976.

21. If, in fact, the report (whose publication is expected early in 1980) does go some way to recognising the gravity of the terrorist problems that existed in Argentina in the early and mid-1970s, the Argentine Government are likely to be that much more receptive to its overall judgment and constructive in their subsequent reply. The lesson for Her Majesty's Government and other like-minded governments is that the low-key approaches to express our concern about individual cases is the method most likely to produce results in the field of human rights. My EEC colleagues share this view. We have collectively and individually discussed the question of disappearances with Argentine Ministers; and I believe we should continue to do so. It will be a long haul before Argentina again becomes a politically, in addition to an economically, acceptable partner in the Atlantic world.

22. I am copying this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives in Montevideo, Santiago and Washington.

I am Sir

Yours faithfully

H. M. CARLESS.