

Argentina readies Dirty War trial

MIAMI HERALD
JUN. 20, 2006

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina - A 76-year-old former police investigator went on trial Tuesday on charges of involvement in murder, kidnapping and torture under the former military dictatorship, in the first Dirty War prosecution in two decades.

As Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz was led into a federal courtroom in La Plata, some 35 miles southeast of the capital of Buenos Aires, some 500 demonstrators shouted "genocide!" and "murderer!"

Human rights activists lauded the trial, the first since the Supreme Court overturned two 1980s-era amnesty laws last June. Etchecolatz did not make a statement.

Etchecolatz, former chief investigator for the Buenos Aires provincial police, faces charges in connection with five killings, kidnappings and torture during the so-called Dirty War against political dissent during a 1976-83 military junta, authorities said.

Under the junta, authorities say, some 13,000 dissidents, labor leaders, intellectuals and other opponents of the regime were illegally detained and subsequently made to "disappear." Human rights groups put the toll at more than twice that number.

Nine junta leaders were convicted and imprisoned in 1985 on charges of abduction, torture and execution, but they were pardoned in 1990 by then-President Carlos Menem. Lower-ranking officers also received pardons.

Etchecolatz is the first of dozens of former police and state security agents facing prosecution after the amnesty laws were overturned last year.

The laws were enacted in 1986 and 1987 by former president Raul Alfonsin under the threat of rebellions by military officers opposed to human rights trials, blocking any prosecution of crimes committed under the dictatorship.

Hundreds of former officers who were shielded could now be called back to court, and human rights groups estimate up to 400 may face new charges.

Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director of the U.S.-based group Human Rights Watch, said Etchecolatz's trial was "the end of 20 years of impunity."

"We are finally seeing the results of last year's historic Supreme Court decision," Vivanco said. "The prosecution of those responsible for these crimes is at last moving forward."

He noted that Etchecolatz was convicted on several counts of illegal arrest in 1986 and sentenced to 23 years in prison, but released the following year when the sentence was vacated under the "due obedience law" which restricted most Dirty War prosecutions to commanding officers.

Etchecolatz has been described by authorities as a former top collaborator of Ramon Camps, a now-deceased former Buenos Aires province police chief allied with the military when the dictatorship began with a 1976 coup.

Defense lawyers said they would call more than 100 witnesses. The trial before a three-judge tribunal could last months.