

# Argentina's Dictatorship Stands Trial

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LA PLATA, [Argentina](#), Aug. 14 — The horrific events under a military dictatorship — murders, kidnappings, torture, rapes, the abduction and sale of infants — had gone unpunished for nearly 30 years. But last year Argentina's Supreme Court overturned a pair of amnesty laws, and now the trials of military and police officials accused of human rights violations are finally under way.

In late June, the first trial, involving a police commissioner general named Miguel Etchecolatz, began here in the capital of Buenos Aires Province, less than an hour's drive from the capital. With cameras rolling and winter light streaming through stained-glass windows in a belle époque ballroom at City Hall, witness after witness has told how Mr. Etchecolatz and the forces under his command ordered, supervised and then covered up kidnappings and torture sessions.

Nora Formiga, for instance, was 27 when security forces abducted her and two friends in 1977. Her family was eventually told she had fled abroad, and it was only in 2002 that DNA tests proved that a body found in an unmarked grave here was hers.

"We don't have justice yet, but now we at least have the hope of it," one of her sisters, María Ruth Formiga, 67, said after testifying Monday. "It has been difficult to sit here and hear confirmed all the awful things our family had always supposed to be true, but this is the only way to make sure it never happens again."

The trial is also bringing out evidence of previously unknown crimes. Testimony has revealed instances of prisoners giving birth to children whose names are not on lists of the disappeared, and in a recent inspection of a police station, investigators found a hidden 30-year-old register of the illegally imprisonments.

"As the years have gone by, people have shaken off the fear they felt, even in the 1980's," said Estela de Carlotto, director of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a leading human rights group. "As a result, the testimony we are hearing is more complete and detailed than ever."

Mr. Etchecolatz was the main assistant to Gen. Ramón Camps, the chief of the Buenos Aires provincial police in the first phase of the dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. In the 1980's Mr. Etchecolatz was sentenced to 23 years in prison for human rights violations during that period, but the conviction was nullified by the two amnesty laws passed later that decade.

In June 2005, though, the Supreme Court declared both measures unconstitutional. General Camps had died, leaving Mr. Etchecolatz the most senior surviving police official.

A second trial, that of a police official named Julio Simón, began shortly afterward and has already ended with his conviction and sentencing to 25 years in prison for a variety of offenses. That trial, more limited in scope, has not had the same impact because the judges declined to allow it to be filmed for television.

Any survivors or relatives who may have been expecting a show of remorse from Mr. Etchecolatz have been disappointed. After an opening session in which onlookers, including former victims and their relatives, shouted “murderer” and “assassin,” he has largely absented himself from the courtroom and rejected the legality and legitimacy of the trial, saying he can properly be tried only by a military tribunal.

“Etchecolatz carried out orders and acted in a situation that was the judicial equivalent of war,” one of his lawyers, Luis Eduardo Boffi Carri Pérez, argued in court.

On Monday, the judge, accompanied by a pair of former prisoners, Adriana Calvo, 58, and Jorge Julio López, 77, and reporters, visited one of the most notorious of the clandestine detention centers in the province, the police department’s Fifth Precinct here. Afterward, Ms. Calvo, who spent two months in a secret complex of cells behind the station early in 1977, said the tour had been emotionally exhausting.