

# Another legal setback for ex-junta chief

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**BUENOS AIRES, Argentina** - A federal court judge ruled Tuesday that a presidential pardon of a former junta leader was unconstitutional, the state news agency Telam said.

Judge Norberto Oyarbide's ruling was another legal setback for 81-year-old Jorge Rafael Videla, who is under house arrest as authorities investigate alleged crimes he committed during Argentina's 1976-83 dictatorship.

Videla led the junta during what human rights groups say was the harshest period of the dictatorship. He retired in 1981 and was succeeded by other junta leaders.

Nine former junta leaders including Videla were convicted and imprisoned in 1985 on charges of abduction, torture and execution, but were pardoned by former President Carlos Menem in 1990.

Nearly 13,000 people are officially listed killed or missing as a result of what prosecutors described as the dictatorship's systematic crackdown on dissent, known as the "Dirty War." Human rights groups say the toll is closer to 30,000.

Legal experts said Videla would appeal the ruling. The case will next go to Argentina's Supreme Court.

On Monday, Oyarbide also declared invalid the 1990 pardons of former economy minister Jose Alfredo Martinez de Hoz and former interior minister Albano Harguindeguy in connection with an investigation of two dictatorship-era abductions.

Both men were part of Videla's junta cabinet when he led the March 1976 coup that toppled the constitutional president, Maria Estela Martinez de Peron. Menem also pardoned Martinez de Hoz and Harguindeguy.

Prosecutors have said the three men are wanted for questioning in the abduction and alleged extortion attempts against textile magnate Federico Gutheim, and his son, Miguel, who were held between 1976-1977.

In June 2005, the Supreme Court annulled a series of amnesty laws that shielded dozens of former lower-level police and state security agents from prosecution for Dirty War-era crimes. One trial had since led to a conviction and another trial is continuing as judges move to bring former suspects back into court.