

# Argentine Sentenced to Life for 'Dirty War' Role

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BUENOS AIRES, Sept. 19 (Reuters) — A retired police commissioner was sentenced Tuesday to life in prison for murder, torture and kidnappings during [Argentina's](#) "dirty war," in one of the first sentences since amnesty laws were scrapped last year.

Miguel Etchecolatz, 77, ran clandestine detention centers as provincial police commissioner for Buenos Aires during the military dictatorship from 1976 to 1983, when an estimated 11,000 to 30,000 people were killed in a crackdown on leftists.

The reading of the sentence in a federal court in the provincial capital, La Plata, was interrupted when someone in the courthouse threw red paint on Mr. Etchecolatz, who kissed a crucifix.

Inside the courtroom dozens of family members of victims and human rights activists wept, applauded and jumped up and down. Outside, hundreds more cheered.

"I don't think 'satisfied' is the right word, but this is what this man deserves and finally justice is done," said Chica Mariana, founder of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a group of relatives of people who have not been accounted for.

Mr. Etchecolatz was sentenced to 23 years in 1986 for forced disappearances — illegal arrests carried out by the military government. But he was freed a year later under an amnesty that shielded all but the former military government's commanders.

Dozens of witnesses testified during his three-month trial this year, including former President Raúl Alfonsín, who defended his 1980's amnesty program by saying it was necessary to avoid uprisings in the armed forces.

Last year, the Supreme Court overturned the amnesty law and courts have reopened hundreds of human rights cases.

Mr. Etchecolatz is already serving a long sentence for stealing babies of victims of the military government, a crime that was not covered by the amnesty.

His defense lawyers argued that he followed orders in a wartime situation.

Mr. Etchecolatz told the court on Tuesday that he was a prisoner of war.

“I know you will convict me,” he said. “I also know you aren’t ashamed of convicting a sick, poor, powerless old man. I was part of a war that we won with weapons but we lost politically.”