

'Dirty War' witness disappears after trial

The disappearance of the witness who helped convict a former high-ranking police officer from Argentina's 1970s dictatorship has raised concerns among human rights groups.

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On a cold winter morning last June, Jorge Julio López sat on the witness bench in a courtroom in La Plata, 35 miles south of Buenos Aires, and pointed to a former high-ranking police officer as the man who 30 years ago had ordered him tortured and had executed a fellow political prisoner.

López's testimony helped lead to the Sept. 19 sentence of life in prison for Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz in connection with the disappearance of six people during Argentina's "Dirty War" against political dissent. Etchecolatz was second in command of police in Buenos Aires province, where a third of Argentina's "disappeared" are believed to have been killed in the 1970s.

NOT SEEN FOR A WEEK

But López wasn't at the sentencing to celebrate. He hasn't been seen since the day before the verdict was read, more than a week ago.

Police had no immediate explanation, although it did not rule out that the trial may have upset the 77-year-old man, who could be wandering the streets disoriented or hiding.

But López's disappearance -- followed by a mistaken announcement that his body, shot and burned, had been found on a road where bullet-riddled corpses used to appear during the Dirty War -- brought back painful memories to Argentina. Up to 30,000 were killed or disappeared there in 1976-82.

Today, human rights groups are organizing a march to Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo. They are asking for López to be returned alive, much as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo did when pleading for their disappeared sons and daughters.

ABDUCTION FEARED

"He could be the first disappeared in democracy," the governor of Buenos Aires province, Felipe Solá, said, as reported by the local daily *Página/12* on Tuesday. "We can't rule out that he might have been kidnapped to intimidate other witnesses."

Government officials and human rights groups fear López may have been kidnapped by current or former members of the Buenos Aires police force.

"Etchecolatz's sentence does not end with him. It may touch a lot of people who served under him, who are still in the force and who still have a lot of power," said Carolina Salvador, a member of the human rights group *Hijos de La Plata*.

Human rights groups say at least 80 police officers have links to the 1970s force led by Etchecolatz and his boss, the late Juan Ramón Camps.

Nine of the 22 concentration camps for political prisoners in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship were under the supervision of Camps and Etchecolatz.

Last Friday, Solá placed 60 police officers on suspension pending investigations into their past.

Solá's spokesman, Enrique Moujan, told The Miami Herald that the government has been distributing flyers with López's picture and is offering a reward of about \$65,000 for information about his whereabouts.

"Even if we find him alive, and I hope we do, just the fact that the authorities are actually considering the possibility that the police may be involved is very serious," Guadalupe Godoy, López's lawyer, told The Herald.

"This screams loud and clear that the repressive machine has not been taken apart."