

Death Squad Fears Again Haunt Argentina

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BUENOS AIRES, Oct. 7 — A crucial witness in the trial of a notorious human rights abuser has been missing for nearly three weeks, and authorities and rights groups here say they fear he may have been abducted and killed in a new campaign to intimidate prosecutors, judges and witnesses in cases that have not yet gone to court.

The disappearance of Jorge Julio López, 77, a retired construction worker and former political prisoner, has awakened a host of old fears among Argentines. Some worry that it is a signal of a return of right-wing death squads that were thought to be extinct, precisely at the moment when the leaders of those groups are belatedly being summoned to justice.

“They are sending a message, that they can still threaten, kidnap and kill,” said Nilda Eloy of the Association of Former Detainees and the Disappeared, referring to former members of the police, security and military forces that were responsible for the forced disappearance of as many as 30,000 people. “There is a great deal of fear.”

Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, is awash in posters with Mr. López’s name and image, some urging anyone with potential clues or leads to call a hot line, and others proclaiming “We are looking for truth, justice, Julio.” The government has offered a \$65,000 reward for information that can establish his whereabouts or fate, and on Friday night an estimated 100,000 people marched to the main plaza here to call for Mr. Lopez’s reappearance.

Mr. López vanished Sept. 18, one day before Miguel Etchecolatz, who was the police commissioner in Buenos Aires Province during the right-wing military dictatorship that ruled [Argentina](#) from 1976 to 1983, was sentenced to life in prison.

More than 130 people testified in the trial, but Mr. López's turn on the stand provided some of the most emotional moments. He was also one of two former prisoners who in August led the judge in the case on a tour of the police station that 30 years ago was the clandestine detention center where they and dozens of others were secretly held and tortured.

During the tour, which reporters attended, Mr. López was in a visibly distressed, even anguished, state at having to return to what he said was the site of his most painful memories. That has led to speculation that, rather than being the target of a political kidnapping, he may have had a nervous breakdown or even committed suicide.

But his family rejects that theory and judges, prosecutors and other witnesses said they have also been threatened in anonymous letters and telephone calls.

Leaders of some rights groups said they had even returned home from meetings to discuss the López case only to find that they had been surreptitiously recorded, and that messages on their phone machines played back their own words.

In the 80's, Mr. Etchecolatz was convicted of similar murder, kidnapping and torture charges, but that verdict was overturned by a pair of amnesty laws passed later that decade.

In June 2005, though, the Supreme Court ruled both amnesty measures unconstitutional, making it possible to revisit old prosecutions and begin new ones.

Mr. Etchecolatz's trial was the first to start, but more than 200 security officials of the dictatorship, including former presidents and junta members, are under investigation and could face charges.

On Thursday evening, several thousand supporters of the dictatorship and its antileftist campaigns marched to a main square here to demand a new blanket amnesty for all officials who might face trials.

The main speaker, José Sacheri, the president of the Argentine Association of Victims of Terrorism, accused the government of [Néstor Kirchner](#) of seeking a “rebirth of the confrontations of the past” and of violating the human rights of patriots who were merely defending Argentina against “subversion and terrorism” from the left.

“The past has not been defeated or overcome,” Mr. Kirchner said last month in reference to Mr. López’s disappearance, also warning against those who “want to sow fear.”

“Let’s stay on the alert, Argentines, we can’t allow this past to repeat itself,” he said.

The government has offered bodyguards to some rights leaders and potential witnesses who may be having second thoughts about testifying in the coming trials.

But some former victims, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they were reluctant to accept that offer because the protection would come from members of the same police forces that were under suspicion in Mr. López’s disappearance.

“If someone has the nerve to kidnap a person in a case like this one, we can expect anything,” said Felipe Solá, the governor of Buenos Aires Province, who has clashed repeatedly with police forces there.

He has also called Mr. López “the first person to disappear under democracy,” though a few disappearances occurred in the 1980’s.

Roberto Saba, director of the Association for Civil Rights, a rights group, said, “It’s an irresponsible statement, because we are not talking

here about forced disappearances as a policy of state, which is the way we define the disappeared in Argentina.”

“That is not to say that some police officers or members of the security forces may not be involved in this case,” he said. “But the government is uneasy and worried and making an effort to find him.”

Mr. López’s disappearance has also contributed to friction in leading rights groups.

Hebe de Bonafini, who as a founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is a prominent human rights campaigner, has in recent years made remarks that other rights advocates deem offensive. She made anti-Semitic comments about another prominent rights defender, Horacio Verbitsky, and expressed glee at the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, saying Americans deserved a taste of their own medicine.

In this case, after a meeting with Mr. Kirchner, Ms. de Bonafini deprecated Mr. López as “not a typical disappeared person” because he had relatives who are police officers and lived in a neighborhood that had many police and security officials as residents.

In a radio interview on Sunday, Estella de Carlotto, the leader of another rights group, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, said that “to diminish the merits of a victim is not correct.”

She warned that “we are beginning to argue among ourselves, and we are losing sight of the objective.”