

# Alleged Argentine abduction raises questions

The kidnapping of a high-profile human rights trial witness is shaking Argentine society, but some claim the abduction may have been staged.

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**BUENOS AIRES** - A kidnapping or a political stunt?

The question is reverberating here in the mysterious case of Luis Gerez, a witness in a human rights trial who went missing last month and reappeared two days later, shirtless and in shock, saying he had been kidnapped, tied up, beaten and burned with cigarettes.

The case has raised troubling questions in a nation still torn by memories of a brutal military dictatorship that ended almost a quarter of a century ago, leaving as many as 30,000 people dead or "disappeared."

Many had hoped that kidnappings as a means of political coercion were a thing of the past.

In a nation inured to political skulduggery, denial and disinformation, the disappearance and reemergence of Gerez has spawned sinister theories. Most center on the actions of President Néstor Kirchner, who has made punishing past military abusers a focus of his administration, and who intervened directly in the case.

## THE KIDNAPPING

Gerez, whose testimony in 2005 about being tortured during the dictatorship helped banish a powerful former police official from Congress, said he was abducted Dec. 27 while walking to a grocery store near his home north of the capital.

He said men forced him into a vehicle and drove him to a warehouse or a shed, where he was kept hooded.

"I thought they were going to kill me," he told investigators, recalling a moment when he could hear a gun being cocked.

The incident came a few months after the unsolved disappearance in September of another human rights figure, Jorge Julio López, whose testimony last year helped send a former provincial police chief to jail for life.

López has been called the first *desaparecido*, or disappeared person, since the return of democracy to Argentina. Police fear that he was killed.

López, like Gerez, was a construction worker and one-time left-wing activist.

The disappearance of Gerez, 51, apparently so alarmed Kirchner that he took the unusual step of going on television and radio on Dec. 29 to denounce it. The president blamed "paramilitary and parapolitical elements" for the disappearance.

"We are not going to surrender to extortion," Kirchner said.

Less than an hour after Kirchner's address, Gerez reappeared on a suburban street in the neighborhood where he said he had been kidnapped. He was dazed but in good health.

"Mr. President, I owe you my life," Gerez told the local media.

Gleeful presidential aides said Kirchner's words had spooked the bad guys.

The political exploitation was too much for an opposition scrambling to find an alternative to Kirchner in national elections scheduled for this year.

Critics suggested that the incident was staged to enhance the crafted crusader image of Kirchner, who has pushed to nullify amnesties given to suspects from the former dictatorship's "dirty war" against perceived enemies. "A fabrication," said former President Carlos Menem, a fierce Kirchner rival from the right.

A leftist congresswoman, Elisa Carrio, accused Kirchner of lying.

### **A FAKE EPISODE?**

Others have suggested that the president's underlings might have faked the episode without his knowledge.

Kirchner "was sold a novel and he bought it, and now he has to take the responsibility for that," Luis Patti, a retired police inspector, told a radio station.

It is not lost on observers that Patti may have a grudge to bear and a reputation to defend.

In congressional testimony in 2005, Gerez identified Patti as a torturer, prompting lawmakers to deny the former police official a congressional seat that he had won at the ballot box.

Now a powerful right-wing political figure, Patti became a suspect in Gerez's alleged disappearance.

He denied any connection.

"I have the tranquillity to say that it wasn't anyone in my party or my entourage that committed this," Patti told reporters. "Behind all this there is a reason, and it is political," he said, alluding to the president's office.

Kirchner's aides have strongly denied that Gerez's abduction was staged. Prosecutors say his story is supported by physical indications that he had been tied and abused, and evidence of psychological trauma.

Authorities said about 4,000 police officers assigned to the case had been unable to find any abductors or the site where Gerez said he was held.

"We have evidence that he had been kidnapped," prosecutor Facundo Flores told reporters recently.