

Rights Groups Hail Arrests of 3 by U.S. in War Crimes

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RIO DE JANEIRO, April 4 — Latin American human rights groups have reacted with satisfaction and muted surprise to the arrest in the United States of three Argentine and Peruvian former military officers accused of human rights abuses who had fled their home countries to avoid prosecution there.

Of the three men detained over the weekend in Virginia, Maryland and Florida and charged with violating [immigration](#) laws, the most notorious is Ernesto Guillermo Barreiro of [Argentina](#). During the so-called Dirty War of the late 1970s, he was the chief interrogator at La Perla, a clandestine prison in Córdoba, Argentina's second largest city, where more than 2,000 prisoners were tortured or killed.

“This is big news, and deserves to be celebrated both in Argentina and the United States,” said Gastón Chillier, director of the Center for Legal and Social Studies, a leading human rights group in Buenos Aires. “This is someone with a long record not just of crimes against humanity, but also of resistance to efforts to hold him responsible for his actions.”

During the 1980s, the democratic civilian government that came to power in Argentina tried to bring Mr. Barreiro to justice. But he defied a court summons to face charges and then quickly helped start a military rebellion that led to passage of an amnesty law that exempted officers below the rank of colonel — he was then a major — from prosecution in connection with human rights abuses on the grounds they were merely following orders.

In 2004, a year after Argentina's current president, [Néstor Kirchner](#), came to power promising to revive such prosecutions, Mr. Barreiro fled to the Washington, D.C., area and opened an antiques store. The Argentine Supreme Court overturned the amnesty nearly two years ago, and several hundred people now face charges, including Mr.

Barreiro and María Estela de Perón, the former president, who lives in exile in Spain and is fighting extradition.

The arrests have put the Bush administration in the unaccustomed position of being praised by human rights groups and news organizations in Latin America. The former officers were detained by a unit of the [Homeland Security Department](#), which is traditionally widely criticized in the region for the way it treats illegal immigrants from Latin America.

“This administration has a very poor record as regards international human rights law and the Geneva convention,” José Miguel Vivanco, the director of Human Rights Watch Americas, said in a telephone interview from Washington. “However, there is nothing on the record that shows that this administration is interested in protecting individuals responsible for gross violations of human rights, unless they have some link with intelligence agencies.”

Mr. Vivanco said he was referring to Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban exile and former [C.I.A.](#) asset who is wanted in Cuba and Venezuela on charges that he blew up a Cuban airliner in 1976, killing 73 people. The United States has also declined to extradite Emmanuel Constant, former leader of a right-wing Haitian paramilitary group who has been convicted in absentia there of organizing a 1994 massacre.

It is not yet clear how American authorities intend to handle Mr. Barreiro’s case. He could either be summarily deported for having lied about his record on his visa application, tried and jailed in the United States in connection with that offense, or extradited to Argentina, normally a time-consuming process.

“It would be an irony if an immigration infraction were to delay Barreiro’s return,” said Horacio Verbitsky, an Argentine author and journalist who has written several books on human rights issues. “The United States could impose no more severe punishment than to send him back to Argentina, where he faces life imprisonment but will receive due process and the fair trial” he denied his victims.

The other two men being held, Telmo Ricardo Hurtado and Juan Manuel Rivera Rondon, are Peruvians. They are accused of having participated in the massacre of 69 peasants in an Andean village in 1985, when President Alan García was trying to suppress the brutal Maoist [Shining Path](#) guerrilla movement.

Mr. García is once again president, and the extradition or expulsion of the two officers to stand trial in [Peru](#) could produce embarrassing revelations there. Concerns about a cover-up or official foot-dragging are among the reasons human rights advocates say they will monitor the case closely.

“The de facto policy of the Peruvian military has been to provide zero cooperation in cases of abuses committed in the 1980s,” Mr. Vivanco said. “To send these fellows back is the right thing to do, but I think it would be important to get assurances at the highest levels of the Peruvian government that the military are going to break with that pattern.”