

# Defendant's wife, kids held in Argentina

The Miami Herald  
Dec. 14, 2007

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

Police detained the wife and two grown children of a former coast guard officer who died mysteriously in jail amid a dictatorship-era human rights trial, hours after an autopsy found cyanide in his blood, a judge said Friday.

Hector Febres, 66, was accused of kidnapping and torturing dissidents during Argentina's past military dictatorship. He was found dead in his cell at a navy brig on Monday, four days before an expected verdict in his high-profile case.

Official reports initially suggested Febres had died of natural causes, but autopsy results released midweek revealed a large quantity cyanide in his bloodstream - alarming human rights activists who feared he may have been poisoned to silence his testimony and prompting the court to swiftly open an investigation.

Federal Judge Sandra Arroyo Salgado said she had ordered Febres' three family members and two officers in charge of the navy brig detained in a sweep of raids that brought computer equipment, files and other materials in from their homes.

The judge's office did not give a reason for the pre-dawn detentions Friday. Investigators said they had not yet determined if Febres had poisoned himself.

Febres, who was facing life in prison on charges related to the disappearance and torture of four people during the so-called "Dirty War" crackdown on dissent, was the first suspect tried for abuse at the notorious Navy Mechanics' School, the largest prison camp of Argentina's 1976-1983 junta.

During his trial, Argentine prosecutors characterized him as a fierce torturer. His defense team said he was innocent.

Jailers found Febres dead in his cell before breakfast on Monday.

About 13,000 people were killed or made to "disappear" by security forces during the country's seven-year junta, according to official figures. Human rights groups say the number is closer to 30,000.

About 4,500 prisoners passed through the Navy Mechanics School, and many were never seen again.

President Cristina Fernandez, who was sworn in Monday, has promised to bring dozens of slow-moving human rights cases to conclusion.

Human rights activists called Friday for a clarification of whether Febres had poisoned himself or others had, expressing fear that some may have sought to silence him because he knew of abuses at the Navy Mechanics' School.

Febres died before his last chance to testify in his defense on Friday.

"It's very suspicious," said activist Emilio Persico. "Febres was to have had his chance today to speak out in court. We were desperate to know what he was going to say. He knew a lot."

Martin Orozco, a defense lawyer for Febres' relatives, said the man's wife, daughter and son were being held at separate detention centers and barred from contacting lawyers. He later said a judge was investigating how Febres died.