

Torture Center to Bear Witness

Argentina Is Converting Its Notorious Navy School To Human Rights Memorial

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BUENOS AIRES -- The rubber tip of Victor Basterra's cane bounced from one photo to another, pointing out the faces that elicit the most vivid memories from his encounters with them in this same building more than 25 years ago.

Basterra was a prisoner here at the Navy Mechanics School, the largest and most notorious political detention center used by the military dictatorship that ruled [Argentina](#) from 1976 to 1983. The navy finally moved out at the end of last month, allowing workers to begin transforming the 40-acre campus into the country's first comprehensive human rights memorial recalling that era and its lingering consequences.

"This guy beat me," he said, pointing to one of the black-and-white head shots of ex-military officials displayed on a mural inside one of the buildings. "And this guy beat me a lot. That one there was the boss."

Basterra snapped the pictures himself while detained here from 1979 to 1982. The officers put him to work developing snapshots of them for false identification documents, he said. But he secretly made copies of their photos as well as those of some of his fellow detainees. Some of the smuggled photos are the only evidence proving that certain prisoners, who were never seen again, had been held by the military.

The continuing relevance of those photos -- as well as much of the other physical evidence remaining from the era -- has rarely been more obvious: Not only will they be important holdings for the new museum; they will also be key exhibits in upcoming trials for crimes that occurred at the Navy School.

The Navy School trials are considered by many to be the most emblematic of the many dictatorship-era human rights cases that have been scheduled for hearings since the Supreme Court declared in 2005 that amnesty laws protecting former military and police members were unconstitutional.

But many of those cases have been delayed in the courts, leading some human rights activists to worry that some of the estimated 1,400 members of the military and police awaiting trial will never face justice. In a move to address the problem, the Supreme Court last week ordered that the Navy School cases be expedited. The trials are expected to begin soon.

During the dictatorship, between 9,000 and 30,000 people were "disappeared" -- meaning that they are missing and thought dead. Many are thought to have spent time at the Navy School, where surviving detainees such as Bastera say they were tortured.

Bastera toured the campus last week for the first time since the military left. In a building where he said he took many of the photos now on display, he gazed out from an upstairs window and said he remembered standing in that exact spot in 1982, watching officers carry the body of a prisoner they had killed from the infirmary building across the road.

The infirmary was also where many female detainees are believed to have given birth, only to have their babies taken from them and adopted by military families. There are thought to be as many as 500 such cases, and more than 80 children have tracked down the truth of their histories in recent years thanks to the help of an advocacy group, the Association of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

Estela de Carlotto, founder of the group and the mother of a disappeared detainee who gave birth while imprisoned, toured the Navy School this month just days after the military exited.

"This is historic, one of the great successes of the democracy we currently live under -- to take possession of a place that was a torture center, where many of our grandchildren were born, and turn it into a center for remembrance," said de Carlotto, 77, who has not been able to track down her own grandson, who would now be 29. "More than anything, it gives young people the opportunity to understand what happened so they can live in freedom in the future."

Museum organizers are still deciding which parts of the campus, which contains more than 30 buildings, will include exhibits. As workers continue to repair structural damage to many of the buildings, the only tours available are prearranged, guided visits.

Organizers said they plan to equip the school's large entrance building with multimedia displays detailing the history of state terrorism in Argentina. Other buildings accessible to the public will be places of reflection, with a few modifications and explanatory signs detailing the activities that took place there during the 1970s and '80s.

"It's not simply a museum to tell what happened in these buildings, but instead it will give the whole story of state terrorism, including its antecedents and its consequences," said Ana Marçá Careaga, director of the institute overseeing the museum project. "All of Argentine society was a victim of state terrorism because when the rights of people are forgotten, everyone suffers."

Some human rights groups objected to the museum when President [Nestor Kirchner](#) approved it in 2004. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group separate from de Carlotto's, argued that the events of the dictatorship were still too raw and alive in the minds of its victims to be memorialized in a museum.

During his tour last week, Basterra said he believed that opening the buildings to the public would not deaden those feelings, but instead would allow more people to feel the consequences of the dictatorship.

"To me, this looks exactly the same as it did back then," he said, standing in a room where he slept with other prisoners. "It gives me a strange sensation because it hasn't been modified. I spent seven months here in this room. It's full of terrible memories -- but also memories of solidarity and of courage. It's a powerful feeling."