

Argentine Army nationalists on trial

by Cynthia R. Rush

Fifteen nationalist officers who participated in an uprising last Dec. 3 against the Army High Command went on trial in Buenos Aires federal court on April 15, in what promises to be a highly charged political event. At the center of these developments is Col. Mohamed Alí Seineldín, a longtime leader of the Army's nationalist faction, who, while not physically present at last December's events in Buenos Aires, took personal responsibility for them and has been jailed ever since. President Carlos Menem had charged at the time that Seineldín and the other so-called *carapintadas* ("painted faces") were attempting to overthrow the government and demanded that they be put to death.

Unlike the summary military trials to which the officers were subjected in December, which sentenced them to long jail terms and stripped them of their ranks for the crime of mutiny, the civilian trial will focus on the political nature of the rebellion and on the history of U.S.-backed government efforts to dismantle the institution of the Armed Forces. The nationalist officers assert that their action on Dec. 3 was one of self-defense, taken in response to repeated provocations and unkept promises by Menem and his predecessor, the social democrat Raúl Alfonsín.

There is no doubt that this trial will be a political battleground. Prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo, who charges the defendants with homicide and an attempted coup, stated baldly that "for us, the most important thing is to make sure the life sentence for Seineldín is upheld."

As part of their defense strategy, lawyers for the accused will call as witnesses many high-level members of the government, including Menem himself, who met on more than one occasion with Seineldín to discuss the Army's internal problems. As one of Seineldín's lawyers noted, "What interests my client is that, through this public process, we can [clarify] the deplorable state of the Armed Forces, and thus, the nobility of the purposes and desires which guided the December episode."

Defense lawyers are maintaining a sharp focus on the question of military policy as well. Juan Carlos Torregrosa, lawyer for Maj. Pedro Mercado, has presented a petition to the American Human Rights Convention, also known as the San José Pact, charging that the repressive treatment of his

clients is the result of a deliberate anti-military policy. He explained that the "National Army" led by Colonel Seineldín emerged in response to this policy, to address the "legitimate needs and requirements of their subordinates."

'I am not repentant'

Backers of the nationalist officers have launched a publicity campaign, including "interviews galore" by the accused to the press, and the plastering of Buenos Aires with posters of Seineldín demanding his exoneration. In one interview entitled "I am not Repentant," published in the April 8 issue of the weekly *Somos*, Seineldín located the military issue in the broader context of Argentina's political crisis.

Asked if he felt betrayed by Menem's failure to keep promises he made, Seineldín replied: "No more and no less than the rest of our citizens: The President made promises to all sectors of society and didn't keep them. The biggest swindle has been committed against the institutions of the Republic." Explaining that Menem has actually eliminated the Armed Forces' *raison d'être*, Colonel Seineldín continued, "What is worrisome is not whether I feel swindled, but what future awaits our society, the Armed Forces, and the nation as a whole."

The colonel's defiant remarks address the depth of the country's economic, political, and moral crisis, as well as the fact that Menem is thoroughly discredited. When *Somos*'s reporter remarked that the colonel was viewed more as a political than a military leader, Seineldín responded: "I am a colonel of the Nation, who has the duty, and the right to fight to defend its highest interests. Do not confuse this with partisan political activities. One thing is the political party, another is the movement. I belong to the latter, where great politics is distinguished from small. As a citizen I am prepared to assume the role which circumstances impose upon me, to carry forward a National Salvation Front."

For the Anglo-American political establishment, and the Bush administration which is its tool, these remarks aren't good news. This grouping is intent on eliminating the sovereignty of all Ibero-American nations and destroying any institution, such as the Armed Forces, which might defend it. To the degree that Seineldín can rally nationalist forces against these plans, he is a real obstacle. This is why the circles around former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger have invested so much in portraying Seineldín as a fascist coup-monger, and "fundamentalist" threat to the constitutional order.

Under the very volatile conditions existing in Argentina today, the Anglo-Americans have no guarantees of anything, however. Seineldín's backers have said they are determined to provoke a "political scandal" during the trials. The colonel's wife, Mrs. Marta Labeau de Seineldín told the daily *Página 12* that it is the Army High Command, and not the nationalists, who are really on trial, because they are responsible for the institution's disintegration.