



The Disappeared of Latin America

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Involuntary disappearance within the Latin American region has been a frightening phenomenon over the past decade. Here I will deal with the two salient cases of Chile and Argentina, with brief reference to other countries.

Involuntary disappearances, in the sense I will use the term, involve the arrest or surreptitious kidnapping of persons thought to be out of sympathy with the regime in power, carried out by agents of the government or by semi-legal organizations abetted by, if not fully responsible to, the authorities; the disappeared person is not heard from again, and the fact of his or her arrest, incarceration, or assassination is, in the situations we are dealing with, routinely denied by the agencies of government. In numerous instances, especially in Chile, the person's very existence is officially denied until government documents attesting to the person's birth, identity card number, etc. are brought forth.

Disappearance as a policy of repression is not a universal phenomenon among the military regimes of Latin America. But it is sufficiently widespread and so vicious a practice in two principal situations, those of Chile and Argentina, and in several lesser ones, that it merits the intense scrutiny of our government and of all people concerned about justice and human dignity.

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Very early on the morning of May 14, 1976, armed men claiming to be members of the Argentine Army entered the Buenos Aires apartment occupied by Emilio and Angelica Mignone and their children. Both adults had been active in Catholic movements for years at the national level; Emilio is a renowned educator and former university rector, and had served as assistant secretary of education in a previous government. I first came to know the Mignone family in the mid-Sixties, when Emilio was with the OAS in Washington and the eldest daughter, Monica Maria Candelaria, was a young teenager.

It was Monica whom the armed intruders came for that early morning over three-and-a-half years ago. They took her away and she has not been heard from since. In the same morning four others—two young couples, like Monica in their early twenties, all of them friends—were similarly arrested. From testimonies pieced together by others who had been detained and subsequently released, including a Jesuit priest, it is clear that Monica and the others were brought to official prisons and interrogated. Yet the military authorities of the Argentine Government steadfastly maintain that they know nothing about the cases.

Three months after the abduction I was visiting the Mignones in their apartment when word came that thirty bodies had just been found in a pasture near Pilar, about twenty-five miles northeast of Buenos Aires. They had been machine-gunned and blown up with dynamite. That same day another sixteen bodies, similarly machine-gunned, were found in a suburb on the south side of the city.

For the Mignones and now for many thousands of parents, spouses, and other relatives in Argentina, the tragedy of the forty-six killed on August 20, 1976, is

compounded by the uncertainty, maybe never to be resolved, about whether their loved ones are still alive or were among those whose bodies were so badly mutilated as to defy identification.

In mid-September, 1979, a hunger strike in support of the families of the disappeared in Chile came to an end. The strike had begun in Santiago on September 4 in three churches, the Danish Embassy, and the Santiago office of UNICEF. It quickly spread to other churches, other cities, other countries, where fasts in solidarity with those in Chile were begun, including some at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington. After a number of people had been arrested and held briefly (among them three priests, a nun, and an American correspondent) and 130 priests and religious joined the fast, the Chilean authorities appeared to grant the one specific demand of the fasters and the strike was called off.

That demand was the return to their families of the fifteen bodies discovered last November in an abandoned lime kiln in Lonquen, some thirty miles from Santiago. All have now been identified as persons whose names were in the extensive files maintained by the Catholic Church on the disappeared in Chile. Among them were Adrian Maureira Lillo and his sons José, Rodolfo, Segundo, and Sergio; Enrique Astudillo Alvarez and his sons Oscar and Ramón; and the brothers Carlos, Nelson, and Oscar Hernández Flores. All but one were agricultural workers from the small town of Isla de Maipo and members of the peasant union, Ranquil.

On October 7, 1973, three weeks after the Chilean coup, all these men had been taken from their homes, in the presence of other family members, by agents of the local police. A report signed by the arresting lieutenant states that they were transported the following day to the National Stadium "to be interrogated by specialized personnel." From that date to the beginning of 1979 the Government of Chile repeatedly denied any knowledge of these cases.

It was the government-appointed special investigator who provided the first break. Judge Adolfo Bañados is a quiet, reserved man with a reputation for impeccable professional integrity and known to be politically conservative. Soon after assignment to the Lonquen case last December, he requested a copy of the list of disappeared prisoners maintained by the Church Vicariate of Solidarity and began interviewing families of the disappeared from around the gravesite. After comparing the coroner's findings with medical, dental, and other records he called in some family members to identify articles of clothing.

The judge then conducted interrogations of police involved in the arrest and the officer in charge of the local police post in October, 1973. At this point the influential Santiago daily, *El Mercurio*, began calling for Bañados's resignation, and the Supreme Court stepped in, enjoining him from making any public statements about the case. On the fifth of June the case was turned over to the military tribunal. But the facts were now out, sad as they are to the families of the fifteen, who could hope no longer, and the junta's unvarying

denials of any knowledge were dealt a major blow.

But the deception and resourcefulness of the authorities would be demonstrated once again. While a military tribunal had ordered the bodies returned to their families, an army judge ordered the remains buried immediately in a common grave, and witnesses were barred. More than a thousand people, including the victims' relatives, were gathered in a church on September 14, 1979, for the funeral mass when they learned of the secret burial. The Church hierarchy is quoted as calling this latest affront "inconceivable and cruel" and asking, "What right is there to bury anyone without the authorization of his kin?"

Pilar and Lonquen are names that will go down in history as bloodstained symbols of violent repression in today's Latin America. There are many such place names that chronicle the organized violence that has been visited upon the poor, the workers, the indigenous, the political dissidents so often in our times: Tlatelolco in Mexico, Olancho in Honduras, Aguilares and San Pedro Perulapan in El Salvador, Panzos in Guatemala, Esteli in Nicaragua—the list of atrocities more dramatic than the daily violence suffered by all the poor is a long one.

But Pilar and Lonquen have a different meaning; they symbolize what, over the last six years especially, has come to be seen as one of government's most vicious methods of repression, the systematic policy of disappearances.

In an open letter sent to the Catholic bishops of Latin America meeting in Puebla, Mexico, last January and February, Amnesty International wrote that "in spite of the difficulty in establishing exact numbers, it is estimated that there currently exist more than 17,000 political prisoners and more than 30,000 who have disappeared on the Continent." According to Amnesty, there are in Argentina alone at least 15,000 cases of disappearance, and in Chile since the coup in 1973 no fewer than 1,500 cases for which the authorities have provided no adequate response.

By some accounts the figure for Chile runs as high as 2,500, just as some sources within Argentina maintain that a closer approximation would be 30,000. Numbers, of course, are not the central issue; every life is precious, every forced disappearance a crime, and the numbers for which absolutely unassailable data are available are numbingly high.

In Chile the principal agency that has gathered the data and presented the formal petitions or charges to the government has been the Vicariate of Solidarity of the Archdiocese of Santiago. This official agency of the archdiocese was created in the beginning of 1976 to continue and expand the work of the ecumenical Committee of Cooperation for Peace (Comité Pro Paz), founded in October, 1973, and dissolved, under extreme pressure from the government, in December, 1975. Although the Vicariate, like the Comité before it, encompasses a wide range of programs of assistance to those in need, from polyclinics and children's lunchrooms to publications, research, legal counseling and advocacy, it is best known for its work with political

prisoners and the families of the disappeared. For this it was awarded the United Nations human rights medal last December 10 and has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the archives of the Vicaría is extensive documentation, including sworn affidavits from eyewitnesses, on 669 unresolved cases of disappearances between 1973 and 1977. The majority of these cases date from the final quarter of 1973 and the following year, and are broken down by year and geographical area as follows:

THE DISAPPEARED IN CHILE

Year	Provinces	Santiago	Total
73	167	80	247
74	22	201	223
75	21	55	76
76	5	106	111
77	7	5	12
	<u>222</u>	<u>447</u>	<u>669</u>

Of this number of cases, *each of which has been thoroughly investigated and documented*, 478 have been formally presented to the Interior Ministry. The archbishop of Santiago and the Vicariate of Solidarity presented 261 of them; the general secretary of the Episcopal Conference presented 61; and the remaining 156 were presented by the bishops of Talca, Linares, Cópia-po, Temuco, Concepción, Chillán, Osorno, and Los Angeles.

In 1978 it was decided that it was useless to file any further writs of habeas corpus (*recursos de amparo*), given the government's repeatedly broken promises to look into the matter and its intransigent refusal to do so. Formal and voluminous petitions from the churches and others, asking the courts to appoint a special investigator, were filed on May 28, August 1, August 5, and September 5, all in 1975; and again on August 2 and September 14, 1976, and finally on January 27, 1977. Most were summarily rejected; while the last two were received, no result has come of them.

More than once in these six years the families of the disappeared have had their hopes briefly raised:

- On August 5, 1975, the newspaper *El Mercurio* reported that the interior minister had ordered an investigation into the case of 119 Chileans who had supposedly died in Argentina.

- On August 20, 1975, General Pinochet said that the government had begun an investigation "through official channels" of the case of the 119.

- In October, 1975, the Chilean ambassador to the U.N. solemnly declared before the Human Rights Commission that "the Chilean Government has shown great concern [over the problem of the disappeared] and has ordered an exhaustive investigation of the fact."

- On December 22, 1976, General Pinochet promised the director of the International Red Cross to investigate the situation of the disappeared, including those on a list the Red Cross presented him.

- On June 24, 1977, the government promised the secretary general of the U.N. to provide information about the relatives of 26 persons who had conducted a

hunger strike. The note issued by the government on September 23, 1977, merely affirms that the disappeared in question are "not now" being held by any security agency.

To this day none of these promises has been met. The government has put forth all kinds of excuses, arguing the supposed difficulty of investigating the situation. They speak of dual identities, of deaths resulting from shoot-outs, of people disappearing and reappearing, of people going out of the country or into hiding, of persons without legal proof of existence or who are legally dead.

These arguments clarify nothing because they are never accompanied by specific references; they are never connected to the actual persons who are known to be among the detained-disappeared.

The strange case of the 119 is instructive. In July, 1975, two foreign publications, *O Dia* in Brazil and *LEA* in Argentina, both reported that a total of 119 Chileans had been killed in shoot-outs in Argentina. All 119 were names on the lists submitted to the Chilean Supreme Court. Curiously, the issues of *O Dia* and of *LEA* in which these stories appeared were the first and last for each. If the governments of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil were able to uncover information they did not already have concerning these two evidently spurious publications and the fate of the 119, they have not made that known. The relatives of the 105 persons on the list who had been arrested during 1974 and the 14 remaining who had been detained in 1975 still have nothing to go on but anxious hope.

Similarly, the case of "The 13." In March, 1976, there began a severe repression against former members of the now-proscribed Communist party of Chile. In December of that year, thirteen such persons were arrested in coordinated operations and subsequently disappeared. After intense public pressure by the Association of Families of the Disappeared and by the Church, the Supreme Court agreed to appoint a special investigator to look into eight of the cases. Within a week the investigation was closed, the decision based on government certificates declaring that the eight had left for Argentina by way of the Libertadores Pass through the Andes.

Despite voluminous testimony from families and other witnesses that the persons involved had been arrested and had no intentions—or possibilities—of leaving their homeland; despite the fact that the license plate for the automobile one of the disappeared was supposed to have used for the trip had not been issued to any private vehicle in 1976 or 1977; despite even government insistence that one of the persons, Reinalda del Carmen Pereira Plaza, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy, had crossed the Andean pass, not in a vehicle but on foot, the government has failed to this day to take seriously its obligations to its suffering people and to the just demands of the international community.

Indeed, a recent development in Chile has caused new anxiety among the relatives of the disappeared. Since May of last year a number of *familiares* have received through the mail crudely lettered notes containing threats against their lives. On May 30, Amanda del Car-

men Muñoz MacKlein received such a note. She is the mother-in-law of José Arturo Weibel Navarrete, who disappeared after his detention on March 20, 1976. Doña Amanda had participated with other *familiares* in a prayer service for the disappeared in St. Michael's church the previous May and in the fast conducted at the ECLA office of the U.N. in November, 1978. Pictures of both events, torn from the pages of the Vicariate's publication, *Solidaridad*, were included.

On July 14, Violeta Zúñiga Peralta, wife of Pedro Silva Bustos, who disappeared August 9, 1976, received the following note: "It is useless to try to discover where your husband is; we killed him in April 1977 and threw his body, together with many others, into the sea. We killed him because he was a communist and traitor to his country. You too are as good as dead." Both notes and others like them bear the same sign: Comando Carevic, and the slogan *Ojo por ojo*, "an eye for an eye." Luis Carevic was an army lieutenant who was killed in a bomb explosion this past April.

That a new kind of terrorism against the *familiares* has been unleashed in Chile seems beyond question. What its connection with the government or perhaps with former members of the dreaded national intelligence service (DINA) may be remains to be seen.

In their declaration last November "On the Detained-Disappeared," after indicating their conviction that virtually all the disappeared had been taken by security forces of the government and that no government responses had been satisfactory, the bishops lamented that there was little more the Church could do. In the face of government intransigence, the bishops could only—as they promised—raise the fundamental moral questions of justice and truth and try to help those who suffer most from policies of injustice and deceit. Until such time as the truth about the disappeared is known, the bishops wrote in their pastoral letter on "Our Life Together as a Nation" (March 25, 1977), "there will be neither tranquillity for their families nor true peace in the nation, nor will the image of Chile abroad be clean."

If anything, the Argentine case presents a more complicated and even more gruesome picture than that of its neighbor to the west. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States has just concluded its oft-delayed on-site investigation into a human rights situation that is widely considered the worst in the Western Hemisphere. The Commission's findings will be eagerly awaited by the international community, and especially by the families of the more than 5,400 disappeared persons for whom affidavits of habeas corpus have been filed. As indicated earlier, estimates of the total number of disappeared since 1974 (not only since the coup in 1976) run from 8,000 to 20,000, with some even at 30,000. Obviously, disappearance as a policy of political repression is of a different order in Argentina from anywhere else.

Even before the Commission could issue its results, at least two significant events occurred in conjunction with it. The first was the authorized intervention, that is, the

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legal search and seizure, of the four principal human rights offices in Buenos Aires. As a result of a court order in one of the very few cases yet to come before the judiciary, the authorities entered and seized quantities of documentation from the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights, the Mothers and Relatives of the Disappeared, and the Argentine League for the Rights of Man. These raids took place on the 10th and 14th of August, less than a month before the Commission's arrival on September 6.

Whether they had the presumably desired effect of intimidating the *familiares* and human rights activists in Argentina is doubtful; press reports indicate that many hundreds have lined up to present their testimonies to the OAS Commission. But the raids have surely made the work of these organizations more difficult.

The second event, far more ominous, was the decree put into effect on September 12 that allows all disappeared persons to be declared legally dead without official explanation. The previous law provided for a five-year process before declaring a missing person legally dead. Now the government can have the disappeared declared legally dead after a ninety-day period, if no evidence can be produced indicating the person is alive.

While the Argentine Government protests its humanitarian intent in this decree, speeding the process by which survivors can claim pension benefits and the like, others see it quite differently. According to press accounts, several foreign governments and the Vatican have condemned the action; the Swedish Government is quoted as saying that "any plan to declare thousands of persons dead through this law would be considered appalling"; and one of the Argentine human rights groups has likened it to the Nazi "final solution" (*Washington Post*, September 14, 1979).

Even allowing for the greater number of reported disappearances in Argentina, a comparison with the Chilean situation reveals many points of similarity. Workers, especially those active in syndicalist movements, young people, especially university students and teachers, and members of now-proscribed political par-

ties have borne the brunt of this repression. Less typical but far better reported by the world press have been the arrest, killing, or disappearance of highly prominent figures in the Argentine community: publishers, writers, scientists, priests and religious.

Because of the similarities that do exist with the case of Chile, and because the media have been relatively more effective in informing the American public of the Argentine horror than of some other situations, I will confine my briefer remarks on Argentina to some of the apparent differences.

I would like first, however, to cite two of the cases that fall into the less typical category, those of more or less well-known people to whose cases some world attention has already been drawn. Both involve religious personnel of the Catholic Church, two women religious in one case, three priests in the other.

There is no evidence that the Argentine authorities have sought an all-out confrontation with the Catholic Church; quite the opposite. Those Church people who have been arrested or disappeared suffered that fate not because of any political activity as such but because their commitment to and work with the poorest and most distressed evidently tagged them as "suspicious."

One of these cases involves the arrest by numerous armed men of Sister Alice Domon, a French missionary, on December 8, 1977; and, two days later, of her sixty-year-old companion, also a French sister, Renée Duquet. All the paraphernalia of an elaborate but heavy-handed plot followed the arrest: a letter in French signed by Sister Domon but evidently dictated in Spanish that claimed the sisters were being held by a dissident group, and a photo of the two nuns in front of a Montonero flag. Since that time, despite wide publicity and formal protest from the French Government, nothing further has been heard.

What is important to stress, however, is the fact that Alice Domon and Renée Duquet had devoted their lives to helping the mothers and families of the disappeared and that, at the same time as their arrest, at least eleven others, *familiares* of the disappeared, were also taken. These people illustrate the far more general plight of those who have no one to speak for them.

The other case involves the last three members of a religious order, who may still be in Argentina. The entire group, called the Little Brothers of the Gospel, has been eliminated from the country. Father Patrick Rice, an Irish national who was arrested in October, 1976, and brutally tortured before international pressure secured his release, is a member of this group. Still unknown is the fate of Father Kleber Silva Iribarnegaray, Uruguayan, arrested June 14, 1977, Father Carlos Armano Bustos, Argentine, arrested April 9, 1977, and Father Pablo Gazzarri, Argentine, arrested November 27, 1976.

All the members of this group, the Hermanitos del Evangelio, live in the spirit of the French mystic of the desert, Father Charles de Foucauld, and work at the humblest tasks and with the poorest people. It is that very life-style of poverty, self-abnegation, and total commitment to Christ in the poor that is so threatening to the totalitarian mind.

When did disappearances begin in Argentina? The usual date is given as March, 1976, when the military junta took over the reins of government. But there is strong suggestion that parts of the military had begun this policy as early as 1974 and '75, as the "dirty war" against the various Peronist and other guerrilla factions escalated.

Admiral César Augusto Guzzetti, at the time Argentina's foreign minister, is cited as giving this view its classic formulation. In an interview with *La Opinión* of Buenos Aires, Guzzetti is quoted: "There is no right-wing subversion or terrorism as such. The body of society is affected by a disease that corrodes its entrails and forms antibodies. These antibodies cannot be regarded in the same way as the microbe itself. The action of the antibody will disappear as the government controls and destroys the guerrillas. I am sure that, in the next few months, there will be no more right-wing actions, this is already happening. It is just a natural reaction of a sick body" (Buenos Aires *Herald*, October 12, 1976).

This view of politics as pathology is reminiscent of the cancer analogy used so freely in Chile after the coup. The cancer of communism must be excised, totally cut out, regardless of what harm might be caused to neighboring tissue. But the surgery in Chile—the arrest, detention, exiling, and killing of thousands of people—was done noisily, almost openly. And world opinion mobilized quickly in this case to condemn the evident bloodbath.

Such was not the case in Argentina, which in historical terms seems closer to the French campaign in Algeria during the late 1950's and early '60's. It too was a "dirty war" against armed guerrillas and urban terrorists; the use of torture was systematic and brutal; and suspects, once tortured, could not be allowed to be seen again. They disappeared.

Already before the 1976 coup, Argentina was plagued by terrorist activities, including those of the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, the infamous "Triple A" with which deposed President María Estela de Perón's chief advisor, José López Rega, was associated. The state of siege declared in November, 1974, evidently gave free rein to the various branches of the military and police forces to carry out, with minimal public attention or centralized coordination, the "dirty war" against subversion.

In their pastoral letter of May 1, 1977, the Argentine bishops declared that no theory of collective security, no matter how important, can subvert the rights of the person, "since the social order and its progress . . . must be subordinate to the order of persons and not the opposite." The inversion of this order, they charge, "as well as a mistaken concept of personal or social security have led many consciences to tolerate and even accept the violation of the elemental rights of the person. . . . It has led to the acceptance of the legality of the murder of the enemy, moral and physical torture, the illegitimate deprivation of liberty or the elimination of all those who are presumed to be aggressive against the collective or personal security, in contradiction to the principle of Paul VI, 'If you wish peace, defend life.'"

Severe violations of basic human rights, including instances of disappearance, have been noted in several other countries of Latin America. In none of them does the phenomenon of politically motivated disappearance appear to be as widespread or as systematic as in the countries just cited.

Uruguay, which has held the unenviable record of the largest number of detentions as a percentage of total population, is particularly instructive as an example of collusion across national borders among the security forces of the Southern Cone, frequently involving the disappearance of persons from one country and their reappearance, in jail or dead, in another—or, as in the famous case of the exiled Uruguayan political leaders Zelmar Michilini and Héctor Gutiérrez Ruíz, the assassination in the other country, in this case Argentina.

Paraguay, which also until recently held the record for the longest detentions without trial of political prisoners, is occasionally cited for disappearances. The number for which concrete data exist is small, however, said to be due to the families' reluctance to press charges in an uncertain judicial system. Similarly from Colombia and, to the north, from Mexico have come occasional reports of disappearances, generally localized in heavily indigenous or other particular areas.

But, as everyone is now aware, the most volatile area in the Latin American region today, where human rights violations are frequent and systematic, is Central America, particularly the countries of El Salvador and Guatemala. Allowing for obvious differences in the political and social organization of the societies, one could make a superficial but possibly helpful comparison between, on the one hand, Chile and El Salvador and, on the other, Argentina and Guatemala.

In El Salvador, as in Chile, the repression seems quite focused and apparently coordinated. Part of it—more, indeed, than anywhere else in Latin America—has been directed against the personnel of the Catholic Church, including the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero. And the Archdiocese of San Salvador, like its sister See in Santiago, has assumed the task of being the voice for those who have no voice. It has organized the same kinds of services—social and juridical assistance, research, publication, and the rest—the Vicaría and other Church agencies developed in Chile.

And in El Salvador, as in Chile, the cases of the disappeared are documented, submitted to the government, and publicized in the Church's weekly newspaper, *Orientación*. "¿Dónde están?" each issue asks of the three or five or more new cases adopted each week. "Where are they?" The list at the beginning of September stood at 197, most of them young people, most of them *campesinos*, workers, or students.

In Guatemala the overall violence is far more pervasive, the number of dead and disappeared far greater, the direct role of the government less easily detected. Death squads, some clearly right-wing in political orientation but others less evidently political, abound. Am-

nesty International and others have estimated that more than 20,000 Guatemalans have been killed since 1966 by such vigilante groups. Despite the seeming variety of sources of such violence—again, similar to the image sometimes projected for the Argentine case—human rights observers have lately concluded that a single source can be adduced, namely, the army command. And although priests and religious have been expelled, assaulted, and killed, the government of General Lucas, like that of General Videla, has been more circumspect than those of Generals Romero and Pinochet with regard to the Church.

Cruel and systematic oppression of people because of their class, race, or religion, because of their opinions and ideologies, even because of their ties of kinship or friendship is not unique to our time or confined to our hemisphere. But systematic political repression involving uniquely cruel and sophisticated torture and the policy of disappearance is, at least for our hemisphere, unique to our times. It is what has been happening over the past decade in several parts of Latin America.

Many Christians and Jews in Latin America today have come with sorrow to find new meaning in the words spoken over two and a half millennia ago:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamenting and weeping bitterly:
it is Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

—Jer. 31:15

These words are used often in the religious services conducted by the *familiares de los desaparecidos* in Chile and perhaps elsewhere. They read on and take heart:

Yahweh says this:
stop your weeping,
dry your eyes,
your hardship will be redressed:
they shall come back from the enemy country.

—Jer. 31:16

All the disappeared, those who may yet physically "come back from the enemy country" and those whose bodies have been killed, are immortalized in the plaque fixed on the lime kiln of Lonquén and inscribed with these words of Pablo Neruda:

Though footsteps may touch this spot
for a thousand years they will not cease
the blood of those who here have fallen.
And the hour that you fell
will not be extinguished
though thousands of years cross this silence. 