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Buenos Aires Can Produce Nuclear Arms

While bombs are exploding in the Middle East, a time bomb is ticking in Argentina. And it has nuclear ingredients.

The new Argentine president, Raul Alfonsin, will face one of the most important decisions of any world leader during his six-year term: whether Argentina will produce the first Latin American nuclear bomb.

Can the Argentines do it? They sure can.

The most recent CIA report on Argentina's nuclear capability, classified "Secret," estimates that the Argentine government could have a bomb by the end of next year if the project were given top priority, and in three years without a crash program. By 1986 Argentina will have all the necessary material and production facilities on its own soil.

U.S. intelligence agencies were caught by surprise recently when Adm. Carlos Castro Madero, long-time head of the Comision Nacional de Energia Atomica, announced that the commission had already developed the technology to make en-

riched uranium, a crucial ingredient in nuclear weapons.

Alfonsin vowed during his election campaign that if he discovered the military constructing a nuclear bomb he would have it dismantled immediately. Some analysts suspect Castro Madero's announcement was a last-minute effort by the outgoing military regime to undercut Alfonsin's promise.

From sources in Buenos Aires, classified intelligence reports, and CIA, State Department and congressional sources, my associates Dale Van Atta and Lucette Lagnado pieced together the story of Argentina's ambitious—and unsettling—hope of joining the nuclear club.

There are two ways to make a bomb: with enriched uranium or plutonium. The CIA has been especially concerned about Argentina's plutonium program. Plutonium can be manufactured by reprocessing the fuel rods in nuclear reactors. Argentina already has two nuclear power plants in operation, and by the end of the century it will have six.

Argentina has refused to sign either the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty or the Treaty of Tlateloco, which bans nuclear weapons in Latin America.

But so far, the Argentine nuclear plants cannot be used to make plutonium because the fuel rods are imported under contracts forbidding reprocessing into plutonium. If the

Argentines decided to go the plutonium route they would be breaking the contracts and there would be serious international repercussions.

Even if they haven't been secretly squirreling away plutonium for weapons, as some sources suspect, the Argentines will be able to reprocess fuel rods at their Ezeiza atomic plant by 1986, giving them the ability to produce a nuclear bomb without dependence on foreign suppliers.

Meanwhile, Adm. Castro Madero's announcement of Argentina's enriched-uranium success constitutes an embarrassing failure by U.S. intelligence agencies. Only three weeks before his statement, one intelligence source stated positively that "the Argentines can't use enriched uranium for a bomb because they don't have a program for it."

Although most sources suggest that Argentina has not seriously been trying to build a bomb but is pursuing its nuclear energy program as a matter of prestige, the Reagan administration is concerned about the possibility of a Latin American nuclear power.

A secret White House directive has ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to "maintain close contact with the Argentine nuclear program and be alert to all possible ways of influencing Argentina to pursue a course which would not lead it to the point of developing a nuclear explosives capability."