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Argentina: Implications of Subversive Investigation

President Videla, although faced with a potential political problem, last week adopted a business-as-usual attitude by attending a scheduled meeting with President Stroessner in Asuncion. By going ahead with his trip, despite domestic problems, Videla probably was attempting to demonstrate that he sees no threat to his position.

Before he left, Videla delivered a major public statement on the problem of subversion. His address included a lengthy explanation of a complicated investigation that has linked the leftist Montoneros with prominent civilian businessmen, journalists, and officials of previous governments. The scope of the case has widened steadily and is causing serious concern among military and civilians alike. At the same time, Videla's education minister and a top aide in the economy ministry have resigned. The officials concerned have come in for considerable criticism previously and their departure comes as no surprise.

The most important immediate concern is the investigation of the alleged subversive links between the Montoneros and the family and associates of financier David Graiver. The financier, who some Argentine officials believe faked his own death last year in Mexico to escape punishment or retribution, is said to have handled the vast assets the Montoneros had accumulated in ransom kidnappings. A number of persons connected in one way or another with Graiver have now come under suspicion; some of these are being detained by the government. At least a few of those implicated were minor officials of either the ousted Peronist administration or a past military government.

The arrest of a leading publisher, coupled with the death of one newspaperman and the disappearance of another, is arousing fears that vengeful military "hardliners" are in control of the investigation. Videla's public explanation of the case may have been designed to quell public concern and to assert his control over the situation.

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Nonetheless, the Graiver case, which some top officers have publicly said would prove to be truly shocking, has important political implications. Hardliners, who have been pushing the investigation, will see the case as justification for the harsh measures they advocate.

Although the regime has claimed substantial success against the terrorist movement, the affair will undoubtedly raise new fears among the military that they have only scratched the surface in dealing with the problem. Because it implicates a number of individuals not previously known to be involved with the left, the case could set the stage for the investigation of others who otherwise might not have come under suspicion. The military unity that Videla has carefully put together in recent months does not yet appear to be in grave danger, but the investigation could put that consensus to an early test by emboldening right wing officers who in recent weeks have muted their criticism.

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