

Argentina's 'dirty war' didn't spare babies

By Kelly Hearn
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BUENOS AIRES | Members of Argentina's former military junta are being tried on charges of stealing babies from prisoners and giving them away during the South American country's "dirty war" of the 1970s and '80s.

The grandmothers of the stolen children, who are believed to be young adults unaware of their biological parents, have long campaigned for the trial, and they are getting help from U.S. Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey in seeking justice and reuniting their families.

Last month, Mr. Hinchey asked President Obama to declassify files held by the Pentagon, FBI and CIA that relate to human rights abuses by the junta and especially the disappearance of children.

"I'm trying to get the president to declassify these documents because they could help reveal the true identity of hundreds of Argentine children who were born in captivity and taken away from their biological mothers," Mr. Hinchey told The Washington Times in a telephone interview.

In a letter to Mr. Obama in November, Mr. Hinchey urged the president to exercise his power under an executive order to declassify intelligence files that are more than 25 years old.

"Thousands of families have waited more than 30 years to learn the fates of their loved ones, and we have an opportunity to make a contribution to truth and justice by helping to bring this troubling chapter in Argentina's history to a close," the New York Democrat said in the letter.

"One of the reasons this is so important is that Hinchey is acting at the request of human rights organizations here," said journalist Horacio Verbitsky, a



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Former dictators Reynaldo Bignone (left) and Jorge Rafael Videla have been put on trial on charges of implementing a systematic plan to steal the babies of political prisoners and place them in the homes of others. They have already been sentenced to prison terms for deaths and brutalities that occurred during their regimes.

human rights advocate in Argentina.

"What they are doing in Washington is very important for us. It gives us hope," said Laura Conte, one of the Argentine grandmothers, who are known as the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo.

Officials at the U.S. Embassy here and the government of Argentina did not respond to interview requests.

Between 1976 and 1983, Argentina's military dictatorship kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured and "disappeared" as many as 30,000 people it considered leftist subversives. During that period, officials took babies from prisoners and gave them to police and military couples to raise as their own.

Jorge Rafael Videla, Argentina's president from 1976 to 1981, and Reynaldo Bignone, president from 1982 to 1983, are

on trial with other former junta leaders in the stolen-children case.

Videla, 86, is serving a life sentence for his role in the deaths of 31 prisoners. Bignone, 83, a 25-year sentence for kidnapping, torture and murder.

Mr. Hinchey's request, if granted, would not mark the first time that the U.S. government has released records about Argentina's dirty war. In 2000, the Clinton administration authorized a State Department records release for Argentina.

What's more, among the 4,700 declassified documents released in 2002 under the Bush administration was a State Department cable written by Elliott Abrams, then-U.S. assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs.

Argentine lawyers provided The Times a copy of the declassified cable, dated Dec. 3, 1982.

In it, Mr. Abrams said that U.S. officials broached the matter of stolen children with Argentine leaders, who did not deny that it occurred.

Mr. Abrams wrote: "I raised with the Ambassador the question of children in this context, such as children born to prisoners or children taken from their families during the Dirty War. While the disappeared were dead, these children were alive and this was in a sense the gravest humanitarian problem. The Ambassador agreed completely and had already made this point to his foreign minister and the president. They had not rejected his view but had pointed out the problem, for example, of taking children from their adoptive parents."

Carlos Osorio, director of the Southern Cone Documentation Project at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, said the Abrams memo is key for those wanting to prove the existence of a systematic taking of children.

"The Grandmothers are pointing to this little nugget as evidence that declassified documents help to bring some justice in Argentina then, and thus they want to call for CIA, FBI and Pentagon declassification on Argentina," Mr. Osorio said.

Attorney Luciano Hazan, who is working for the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo on the trial, said Mr. Abrams is scheduled to testify in January.

The problem cited by Mr. Abrams of taking children from their adoptive parents has proved painfully real.

By the time she was an adolescent, Mercedes Landa had started wondering why her parents, a retired colonel and his wife, were so old — too old to be her parents.

"But I was in a very protective household," she said. "I was kept away from a lot of information. I

didn't know for example about the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. So I didn't think too much about it."

At 20, she received an order from an Argentine judge to take a DNA test. When the results came, Ms. Landa — stunned and crying — discovered that her birth name was Claudia Poblete.

Representatives from the Grandmothers group showed her photos proving that her biological parents had been tortured and killed by the same dictatorship her father had helped lead. Both parents are now imprisoned for the illegal adoption.

"Imagine finding out, not only that you aren't who you think you are, but that your parents may have taken part in the killing of your biological mother and father," Ms. Landa said.

Another child of a disappeared couple, Hilario Bacca, said in an e-mail interview that he believes the trials are important for uncovering the truth, but he opposes mandatory DNA orders.

"Each story has its own peculiarities," he said, adding that he and other grandchildren have the legal right to decide for themselves to be tested.

The trial that is under way is just one of many that deal with human rights abuses committed by the junta.

This year, a dozen trials prosecuting military officials for human rights violations were concluded.

Currently, 14 trials are under way, another 10 are set to start in 2012, and 3 others could soon be scheduled across the country, according to a report by the Argentine attorney general's office.

Since the start of the trials in 2007, 802 people have been indicted for crimes against humanity — including military officials, police and civilians — and 243 have been found guilty.