

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Argentine chief suppresses dissent

By Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON — Latin American dictators historically have taken few pains to distinguish between legitimate dissent and acts of terrorism. While the brutal repression of political opponents has succeeded in keeping terrorists in check in countries like El Salvador and Argentina, literally thousands of innocent citizens have suffered in the process.

The right-wing regime of Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina has added a new dimension to the suppression of political dissent. Mere suspicion of

friendship or acquaintance with someone who is considered politically dangerous is enough to bring summary arrest, interrogation and imprisonment without trace.

Videla was the choice of a military junta that seized control of Argentina from Isabel Peron in 1976. He has been waging war against his real and imaginary political opponents ever since, and it has been estimated that as many as 20,000 persons have simply disappeared in the past three years.

Armed thugs on the military's payroll kidnap unsus-

pecting citizens from their homes in the middle of the night and whisk them off to prison. Some are killed outright; others are interrogated under torture. Few are ever heard from again.

Repeated attempts by family members to locate missing sons, daughters, husbands and wives have elicited no meaningful response from the government. Despite the risk involved, some formal protests have been lodged against the Videla regime. Shying from political affiliation, the victims' families seek only information on the whereabouts of their loved ones.

A number of courageous Argentines have dared to take their protest into the streets. Late last year they began marching in the government square in Buenos Aires and demanding information about their missing relatives. Because most of the protesters are women whose sons have disappeared, they are known as the "Plaza Mothers."

Our reporter Bob Thomas recently had a secret meeting with four of these women whose children had been taken away in the night by Videla's secret police. We agreed to keep their identities and the location of the meeting confidential for obvious reasons. Here are two of the Plaza Mothers' stories, which they assured us were typical:

"Two years ago, 18 armed men appeared at my home in the night and took me, my daughter and her husband out of our apartment," said the first woman. "They searched it completely and after two and a half hours they stole everything we had. We were taken to a military base and we were kept there for several days. The military chief on duty ordered that we be placed in their prison."

The prisoners were then interrogated. Electric shocks were applied to prompt those who had bad memories or otherwise gave unsatisfactory answers.

What their captors wanted were names. It has been estimated that 60 percent of those arrested in Videla's "dirty war" have been seized for no other reason than their association with someone believed to be a political threat to the military dictatorship.

"We were threatened with death if we lifted the blindfold," the Plaza Mother recalled, "but I tried twice to try to find my daughter. What I saw was a awful place full of young people, some of them unconscious. Many could not resist the torture and believed they were going to die."

The mother, a woman in her 40s, was set free without explanation after a week. She was told to say nothing about her experience after a week. She was told to say nothing about her experience or she would find that her daughter had been killed in a sudden accident. She has not seen her daughter since.

The second woman told a story of a mysterious disappearance. It shows that hundreds of Videla's prisoners are the prey not just of government terror,

but of greedy, conscienceless opportunists as well.

The second woman admitted her son was politically active. "He was a noble young man who disagreed with the system of repression," she told us. He was kidnapped one day on his way to work and vanished.

A year later a man called and offered to provide the family information about the prisoner — for \$2,000. After an emotional meeting, the mother concluded that the man had no valid information to sell, and rejected his persuasive sales pitch.

Other families have been more gullible. They have paid as much as \$10,000 for information about missing relatives; rarely is the information of any value.

The Plaza Mothers' campaign came to a head last Dec. 31, when they presented petitions bearing 97,000 signatures to the Videla regime. The petitions demanded that information about missing political prisoners be released, that those held without cause be freed and that unreasonable sentences be commuted.

While 2,000 protesters marched in the government square, a delegation of secretariat with government officials. The officials refused to give any information, but they did let the plaza wives remain off the plaza with armed guards.