

Argentina in Shock Over Envoy's Murder

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BUENOS AIRES—When the decomposed body of a middle-aged woman was found floating in the Lujan River here Jan. 11, nothing seemed particularly unusual at first. Thirty-five bodies had washed up on a beach not far from Buenos Aires in December, their heads and hands severed to prevent identification.

But the woman's body was intact and identification was possible. It is unlikely that the killers will ever be prosecuted, even if they are caught, but the fact that Elena Holmberg—a diplomat and a friend of President Jorge Videla—ended her 48 years as a victim of terrorism has shocked Argentina as have few other terrorist acts in recent years.

"Her death was important simply because it won't go away," said a European diplomat who watches the human rights situation here. "The emotional reaction to it was greater than to anything else that's happened in a long while."

The case has had such impact because a growing number of Argentines have reluctantly come to the same conclusion as many foreign observers: Argentina is threatened more seriously by its own internal security forces than by the urban guerrilla groups they were meant to eradicate.

These security forces, which almost all who comment blame for the Holmberg death, also are assumed to be responsible for the extralegal abductions of thousands of suspected subversives here since 1976. It was then that the military overthrew President Isabel Peron and the "dirty war" against terrorism entered its current phase.

The bodies that wash up on beaches are evidence of what happens to those who the secret squads believe have engaged in terrorist acts, according to diplomatic observers and human rights groups.

But now that the leftist guerrillas have almost been defeated, the secret intelligence squads—equipped with guns, unmarked cars and methods for interrogation and torture—have turned to petty crime, to picking up nonterrorist leftists or, as in the case of Elena Holmberg, to silencing even government supporters who might somehow embarrass one of the three armed services.

"Argentina has become like Chicago in the 1930s," said another diplomatic observer. "Each service has its own hit squads which operate freely beyond the law."

Diplomat Holmberg's abduction was typical of those by the secret services and the government has made no effort to blame leftist guerrillas although it frequently does so.

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