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# Expert tells of Argentinean atrocities

By Kevin Harrington  
 Emerald Contributor

In spite of a recent return to civilian government in Argentina, the effects of a genocidal "dirty war" against leftists by the country's former military government during the 1970s have left deep scars on Argentine society, according to mental health expert Dr. Mario Epelman.

Epelman spoke on the "Psychological Effects of Human Rights Abuses" at a brown bag lunch forum at the University on Friday. The forum was co-sponsored by the Council for Human Rights in Latin America, the University Department of Psychology and the Latin America Support Committee.

"We are still suffering the long-term consequences of the dictatorial period (1976 to 1983)," Epelman said. "During this time many human rights abuses were committed. Thirty thousand people 'disappeared.' Many people suffered torture that was nazi-style, but more sophisticated.

"In Argentina we lived through real genocide and this period of terror has left many consequences. It is still a daily struggle to regain freedom of thought," he explained.

Epelman, an occupational health physician and environmental physiologist currently teaching at the School of Medicine at the National

University of Cordova in Argentina, said he was impelled to leave his country when the military took over and the repression began in 1976.

As a leader of a teacher's union, Epelman was considered a "subversive," and an army officer informed Epelman that he should leave.

Epelman said although there was a well-organized, active leftist guerilla movement in Argentina during the so-called "dirty war," most of the people who were arrested by the government had nothing to do with it. Merely having one's sympathies in the wrong place was ground for incarceration, he said.

"One of the ways the military carried out this repression was through the idea that subversion was a 'cancer,'" Epelman said. "In other words, anyone who didn't think the way they were supposed to was considered a 'cancer cell' — and cancer cells had to be removed. As a result, a lot of people ended up in jail who had not participated in any type of political activity."

Under the direction of Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla (now serving life in prison for human rights abuses), Argentina's military government enacted a series of repressive policies that consciously were designed to terrorize the country. Teachers, social workers and students were hauled off to concentration camps and clandestine prisons by the thousands for being "cancer cells."

The military, determined to prevent "cancer" from being passed on to future generations, took children born to incarcerated leftists away from their natural parents and gave them to politically acceptable families for upbringing.

This, according to Epelman, is one of the most poignant legacies of the "dirty war" period. "These kids grew up believing they were the children of the parents who raised them," he said. "Now the truth is coming out, and they are being returned to their families, so you can imagine the conflict within these children. In some cases the people who adopted and raised the children were the same people who tortured their parents. With all these significant psychological problems, these children are going to need ongoing psychological help and support."

Another legacy of the repression is the "fear that won't go away," Epelman said. "The situation of not being able to speak and not being able to have a dialogue with others changed



Dr. Mario Epelman

a family's values. So families became more isolated and lived a life inside their houses that was not shared with others beyond the home. This left its mark on Argentine society.

"Today we have to actively retrieve the freedom to think, to speak, and to disagree. Just because we have a democracy doesn't mean that these things will reappear automatically," Epelman added.

Epelman also noted that there is lingering grief among the friends and relatives of the 30,000 people who "disappeared" during the repression. He characterized contemporary Argentina as a divided society where one might go to a restaurant and see his former torturer sitting at the next table.

He said the mental health needs of Argentine society are unprecedented and demanding. "We don't know how long these effects will last... most of us (in the mental health sector) are not trained to treat people who've been tortured, or who may have lost their brothers or sisters, or their children, and have no idea what happened to them," Epelman said.

Argentina's reign of military terror finally ended in 1983, after a faltering economy and the disastrous loss of the Falklands war to Britain forced the generals to allow democratic elections to be held. One of the first actions of President Raul Alfonsin's civilian government was to order the prosecution of nine military leaders, including three former heads of state, for human rights abuses during the "dirty war."

This meant that Epelman could return to Argentina. During his years of exile, he lived in Mexico and Spain and spent five years working in Nicaragua where he founded and directed the Department of Occupational Health and Safety of the Ministry of Labor. In 1984, he returned to his native country where he resumed teaching at the School of Medicine at the National University of Cordova.

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