

Argentina: concern over continued disappearances

On the eve of the Twelfth International Cancer Congress in Buenos Aires, David Dickson reports on the fate of 15,000 missing Argentinians, many of them scientists

Two weeks ago Dr Lepanto Bianchi, an Argentinian orthopaedic surgeon, was arrested and taken from his office by men who claimed that they were from the federal police force. Dr Bianchi's arrest follows the similar disappearance last month of Beatriz Perioso, president of the Argentine Federation of Psychologists, who was taken away from a child care centre at which she had been working.

No news has since been received of Dr Perioso's whereabouts, nor whether any charges have been made against her. And neither has any information been received about two other psychologists, Arturo Smith and his wife Celia Kriado, who were taken from their home the following day.

The American Psychological Association has written to the Argentinian President, General Jorge H. Videla, requesting information about the situation of the three psychologists, but no reply has been received.

Professor freed

Meanwhile, however, the Argentine authorities last week released Dr Claudio Bermann, a former professor of psychiatry at the University of Cordoba and director of a psychiatric clinic, who had been arrested and held without specific charges since April 1976.

A number of foreign institutions, including Amnesty International and the US National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Human Rights, as well as the Buenos Aires-based Permanent Assembly on Human Rights, had pressed the Argentine government for his release. Last week he was given permission to leave the country, and flew directly to Israel.

In August Elena Sevilla, a research physicist at the Universidad del Sur in Bariloche who had been arrested in November 1975 in hospital shortly after giving birth, was allowed to leave the country after similar moves had been made on her behalf and is now in the US. However in the same month the Permanent Assembly was notified of 11 more "disappearances", and suspects the actual figure may be four or five times this number.

A number of scientists are planning to raise the issue of human rights at the Twelfth International Cancer Conference, which begins in Buenos Aires next week, and is expected to be attended by 7,000 scientists from all over the world.

The National Academy of Sciences, following a visit to Argentina earlier

this year by three representatives of its committee on human rights, decided not to endorse a proposed boycott of the meeting by US scientists. However the committee agreed to assist "those Congress attendees who so desire to express their human rights concerns while in Argentina," primarily through supporting the activities of the human rights clearinghouse of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

A number of those attending the conference are planning to hold regular caucus meetings on the human rights situation in Argentina. And facilities are also being made available to provide conference delegates with information about the current situation by the Permanent Assembly.

Conference officials point out that the high expected number of participants indicates that moves to boycott the conference—a parallel conference, for example, is being held in Paris under the sponsorship of Professor Andre Lwoff, and is expected to attract several hundred participants—are likely to have relatively little impact on the Buenos Aires arrangements.

Other Argentine scientists have publicly objected to the "pernicious propaganda" which they claim is being spread about the current situation. "At present, the universities and research institutes are places of quiet and fruitful work, in contrast to the agitation, the activism and the persecution of professor and scientists that were so frequent before March 1976 [the date of the military coup]", according to two members of the Buenos Aires National Institute of Medicine in a recent letter to science.

Academic asphyxia

The Permanent Assembly, which brings together various Argentinian groups concerned with human rights, sees the situation slightly differently. "In the national universities, if a climate of perfect order rules, it has been achieved at the cost of the virtual extinction of all interchange of ideas, and similarly the elimination of the whole of a vast cultural sector whose political ideas do not coincide with those of the university authorities," the assembly says in the most recent report on its activities.

"This situation has brought about a noticeable impoverishment of the academic level, generating a dangerous climate of academic asphyxia," according to the assembly's third commission,

which is responsible for the areas of culture, religion, the arts, the sciences, the professions and technical fields.

Earlier this year the assembly published in the Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa* a list of 2,500 names of individuals who had disappeared since March 1976, and whose current whereabouts were unknown. A further 500 cases were reported to the assembly after the advertisement appeared, and officials estimate that they have only been informed of one-fifth of those who have disappeared, giving a total number of 15,000.

Many killed

It is feared that up to half of these—men, women and children—have been killed. In addition, it is estimated that there are 8,000 political prisoners being held in Argentine goals, at least half of whom have not been through a proper judicial process.

Scientists figure prominently among those who have disappeared or been imprisoned, particularly those previously involved in organisations such as the now-defunct Argentine Physical Society, which had taken an active part in debates on political issues in the period immediately before the military coup of 1976. However, other scientists who have disappeared or been imprisoned have, it is claimed, played little part in political activity.

Over 2,000 scientists, including both university teachers and research workers, lost their jobs when the military government came into power. Many have since left the country: "the low salaries, added to the lack of security, threats, and the lack of an adequate scientific programme, has motivated the exodus of a great number of scientists and professionals," according to the assembly's report.

Some Argentinian scientists who remain are also concerned at the low priority given to education in the national budget. "In the early 1960s, expenditure on education represented about 20 per cent of total government spending; now it is down to 8.3 per cent," according to Professor Jose Westerkamp, a nuclear physicist at the University of Buenos Aires.

Some areas of research, such as nuclear engineering, still flourish. But in many fields of more basic science, the combined lack of professional manpower, adequate funds, and postgraduate students has resulted in a dramatic decline in activity. □