

Argentine Leader Pledges More Reforms Kirchner, on Washington Visit, Reiterates Vow to Deal With 'Dirty War' Legacy

By Mike Allen
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President Nestor Kirchner of Argentina said after a White House visit yesterday that his country must repeal amnesty laws that protected the perpetrators of torture and killings during his country's military dictatorship.

Kirchner has worked aggressively to reform the courts, police and armed services since taking office two months ago, winning praise from human rights groups and relatives of dissidents who "disappeared" in Argentina's "dirty war" from 1976 to 1983.

Calling for greater accountability and transparency in government, Kirchner suggested in his inaugural address on May 25 that he would push the country to deal with military officials who were given amnesty in the 1990s for prosecuting a war on dissidents that killed as many as 30,000 people, including students, labor leaders and intellectuals. Kirchner used his strongest language yet as he spoke to Washington Post reporters and editors after meeting with President Bush.

"Argentina will have independent courts," Kirchner said. "There can be no impunity in Argentina. . . . A society without justice or memory does not have a destiny."

Kirchner was a vocal opponent of the Iraq war and the Bush administration has regarded him warily. He characterized his half-hour visit with Bush as cordial, focusing on Argentina's financial woes and issues surrounding the fight against corruption and terrorism. The visit marked renewed attention at the White House to neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, and authorities in the region said the visit could set the tone for improved relations between Washington and Buenos Aires.

For Kirchner, the most important goal of his two-day trip to Washington and New York was to build confidence in his government among U.S. politicians and bankers. Kirchner hopes to strike new medium-term loan agreements with international creditors and with the International Monetary Fund, required after his country defaulted in early 2002 on most of its \$141 billion debt.

Kirchner said that in his meeting with Bush, he repeated his criticism of the IMF's support of Argentine policies under prior administrations that he views as unfairly tilted against the country's poor. He said that Bush listened attentively but was non-committal. A senior administration official said the United States wants Argentina to succeed but has not endorsed a specific financial plan.

In the interview, Kirchner compared the pursuit of justice for crimes committed during the military dictatorship to the decades-long search for Nazi war criminals and the

prosecutions of human rights violators during ethnic wars that marked the breakup of Yugoslavia. "There were 30,000 people who went missing in Argentina only because they thought differently," he said.

Kirchner was governor of the oil-rich but sparsely populated province of Santa Cruz before he was elected Argentina's 49th president following a chaotic period that included the ouster of four presidents during a two-week period in 2001. He was the sixth president in 18 months.

Eric L. Olson, Amnesty International USA's advocacy director for the Americas, said Kirchner has already done more than any other recent Argentine president to deal with human rights abuses. But Olson said Kirchner will have a tough time carrying out his promises with a justice system that has a history of corruption and of protecting perpetrators of repression.

"This is so new that we're taking him at his word at this point," Olson said. "His rhetoric thus far has been surprising and very welcome. I don't disbelieve his passion, but he has to deal with doubts about the independence and seriousness of the court system."

Kirchner described his White House meeting as very positive and said Bush was "well aware and up to date" on the anti-corruption efforts in Argentina. Kirchner said they did not discuss Iraq, and said Bush made no specific requests for assistance from Argentina in the war on terrorism.

Staff writer Paul Blustein contributed to this report.

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