

Buenos Aires Herald

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No two sides to human rights

MORE on human rights. First a letter from an Argentine businessman, working for an internationally-known company, addressed to Donald Fraser, the United States congressman who conducted the recent hearings in Washington into alleged human rights violations in Argentina:

"If you claim to be a zealous guardian of human rights, you will undoubtedly have noticed that since 1970 or from the assassination of General Aramburu onwards, human rights in Argentina have been subjected to violent attacks. Since then members of the armed forces and executives of respectable foreign enterprises, including US firms have been either kidnapped or murdered giving this country an image of bloodshed and shame.

"We are glad to note that our human rights problems stemming from international communism or terrorism is a source of considerable worry. Alas, your concern has now come too late — at a time when our people and the armed forces are engaged in defeating the nihilist bandits.

Some people testifying at your hearing are responsible for the Argentine disaster, having been hypocritical enough to attend your audience under the benefit of your democratic system.

"No one has ever thought of going to Moscow to claim protection for human rights.

"Please Mr Fraser: Refrain from so candidly contributing to destroy the remnants of liberty in the new continent.

"In the world today during the ideological battle between liberty or slavery, no one can remain neutral or play dual roles.

"I am sorry I am unable to sign this letter because I may be killed, ironically as it appears, by the very men you are protecting."

Now, a letter from Dr and Mrs Emilio Mignone. Their 24-year-old daughter was seized by armed men falsely identifying themselves as members of the army from the family apartment on Avenida Santa Fe over five months ago.

Dr Mignone, a well-known and highly respected Catholic educationalist (and former under-secretary of education during the former military government) was later told that his daughter had not been taken to the First Army Corps headquarters, as the men said. He has been unable to trace her, despite countless letters, personal interviews, writs of habeas corpus and every other kind of approach to the military and government authorities.

Dr and Mrs Mignone's letter is addressed to Monsignor Adolfo S. Tortolo, Archbishop of Paraná, an old friend of theirs:

"We have read with astonishment and pain in the newspapers of October 15 your declarations in San Luis affirming that you do not know and cannot say whether or not human rights are being violated in our country.

"With astonishment, because this contradicts testimony and evidence which has reached the governing board of the episcopal conference 'the voice of those who have no voice' in overwhelming quantity; which

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you yourself have received in our presence; which nobody ignores; and which many functionaries admit privately, although they try to justify or hush up in public.

"Have you not said time and time again, with the apostles Peter and John, that it is necessary to obey God before man and that it is not right to silence 'what is seen and heard' and with the apostle Paul that the important thing is not to please the powerful but to please God? And don't we know from the apostle James that when a brother is in need it is not enough to tell him to 'go in peace' and promise to pray for him and that one must go to his aid?

"...We are, as we have been all our life and as you know, against all forms of violence. We believe that terrorism must be fought with the legitimate force of the state, exercised according to the norms of a civilized society and not in any other way..."

You could say that the two letters are two sides of the coin of human rights. But that is wrong. There are not two sides to human rights. Violation on one side does not justify violation on the other. It was wrong to raise no voice of protest when General Aramburu was murdered — and there was a deafening silence from some quarters — it was wrong to show no concern when members of the armed forces and policemen were assassinated and to shrug when foreign executives were kidnapped. It is just as wrong now to remain silent about the hundreds of people who seem to have disappeared, like Dr Mignone's daughter, and to show no concern when mutilated bodies turn up on wasteland.

Human rights means knowing the difference between right and wrong and not hesitating to condemn what is wrong, even if it is committed by the side one supports. We will not see a return to the full exercise of human rights in Argentina until the armed forces restore law and order, fully and completely, without once stepping outside the law. In other words, the problem of violation of human rights will be with us as long as the terrorists remain to subvert not only our society but our values. But what if we defeat them at the cost of losing our own souls? Is that our victory; or theirs?

AC yes, but with shades of BC?

I HAD fond hopes that March 24 would mark the beginning of a new era in Argentina — and, as readers may recall, I began referring to events as BC (Before the Coup) and AC (After the Coup) in the weeks that followed the military takeover.

Yesterday, after a bad bout of telephone trouble (the Herald,

with two telex lines not functioning and persistent trouble with telephone lines is back in BC again) I sat down to work out what has improved since March 24.

This is my rating:
Personal security: BC — the only difference being that while businessmen probably feel a little safer now than before March 24, intellectuals feel decidedly more vulnerable. All that has happened — within a framework of still escalating violence — is that your chances of being gunned down by the guerrillas are slightly less; but the possibility of being gunned down accidentally by security forces or by those shadowy agents nobody takes responsibility for are slightly greater. At the same time criminal violence has certainly not diminished. People in the middle, between the two terrorist extremes, feel as insecure as ever. To be completely fair, I would say that the prospects are much more hopeful now than they were before the coup. The trouble is that the improvement is making itself felt very slowly. Hence my mark of BC.

Economy: AC — I find myself worse off financially than before the coup — the result of a continuing process of impoverishment. Nevertheless, I expected that to happen and am reasonably happy that I still have a job, even if it doesn't pay me very much. I expect things to get better. My mark of AC — is a little harsh. Compared with the economic disaster we faced, the situation we are in is better than we had reason to expect. But the hardship has not been fairly distributed. The fat cats are getting fatter and the pensioners, the poor and the middle class are suffering.

Public morals: AC — There is a different moral climate — but there are still enormous areas of darkness. Even if you accept the fact that we are fighting a war (and even some members of the armed forces say that "war" is too grave a description), the rule of law should apply. There is too much uncontrolled thuggery, apart from the terrorism from both extremes, to warrant a higher mark than AC —

General atmosphere: BC. Public services have not improved. Despite the Mayor's efforts (he deserves an AC) Buenos Aires is still a noisy, dirty, bad-tempered city, largely because public employees have not yet been made to understand that they are public servants. The least we ask is civility and politeness. On top of the general rudeness, the anarchy on the roads, and the general lack of consideration for others (particularly old people) on public transport make any other mark than BC impossible, in my view.

What do you think? The areas rated are optional, add more if you wish. A book will be awarded as a prize to the most honest progress report on the battle between AC and BC. And a bottle of sparkling wine to the most brilliant entry. Write (not more than 400 words) to Sidelight, Buenos Aires Herald, Azopardo 455, 1107-Buenos Aires.

R.J.C.