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URUGUAY: DOES DEMOCRACY INCLUDE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS?

A report issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists
and PEN American Center -- June 8, 1983

Uruguay's long-anticipated transition to democracy from a military dictatorship promises to be an uneven experience for all sectors of Uruguayan society. But, as the report issued today by the Committee to Protect Journalists and PEN American Center makes clear, the transition is proving to be especially harsh for the press, which has seen increased repression during the past 18 months since the "apertura," or opening to democracy began.

The report, Uruguay: Does Democracy Include Freedom of the Press?, is the product of an investigative mission to Uruguay in April 1983 sponsored by the Committee to Protect Journalists and PEN's Freedom to Write Committee. The investigative team was headed by Mercedes Lynn de Uriarte, an Alicia Patterson Fellow on professional leave from The Los Angeles Times, and included Lucy Komisar, a freelance journalist specializing in international affairs (and an executive board member of PEN). Two representatives from the Canadian Centre for Investigative Journalism, Susan Ruth Perly of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Kathryn Leger of Canadian Press, were also in the team.

Editors and reporters in this tiny South American nation of almost three million continue to be proscribed, detained, interrogated and, often, physically mistreated. More than 16 newspaper closings were ordered during the past year-and-a-half, while five publications were shut permanently. Economic weapons are also liberally used by the Uruguayan government, creating high levels of indebtedness for many of those publications that remain in business.

Uruguay, which once had a model democracy, has suffered under one of the most brutal regimes in the Western Hemisphere since 1973. At one point, the nation had 5000 political prisoners, more per capita than any other Latin American country; about 1000 remain in

(OVER)

jail, fifteen of them journalists. Of those journalists still imprisoned, many have been held on retroactive charges, suffering torture and extreme psychological abuse. Most are in poor health and at least three are seriously ill.

Although a plebescite held in 1980 rejected the military government's proposal to remain in power indefinitely, and the transition to democracy subsequently announced, repression has continued. Numerous cases of harassment, such as threatening phone calls to newspaper editors from government officials, physical abuse and detention, are all cited in the report. Moreover, because press restrictions are ambiguous and employed arbitrarily, journalists are forced to collude with the government by practicing vigorous self-censorship to insure against reprisals.

Freedom of expression is not currently permitted in Uruguay, the delegation concluded. Midway through the period scheduled to lead to general elections in 1984, disturbing reports about press repression continue. And, although the general consensus among journalists interviewed by the delegation is that things have improved somewhat over conditions prior to the transition process, the government appears to be conducting a pseudo-transition to democracy, rather than an actual transfer of political power to the electorate.

The delegation's report is also highly critical of the lack of consistency in the United States government Latin American policy, specifically as it pertains to Uruguay. The report notes that objections raised over press censorship in Uruguay are absent and that the Reagan Administration has deferred criticizing the postponement by Uruguay's present military regime of general elections until late 1984 -- four years after Uruguayans voted to return to democracy; yet the United States has officially objected to press censorship and the suspension of elections in other Latin American countries.

Most Uruguayans interviewed by the investigative team felt that America's "quiet diplomacy" is so soft that it is inaudible, the report says.

Herald Tribune

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Uruguay: The Embassy Fell Silent

2 JUL 1983

By Lucy Komisar

LOS ANGELES — Much international attention has been focused on the Argentine army's responsibility for the "disappearances" of more than 20,000 of that regime's opponents in the 1970s. But just across the Rio Plata is an Argentina in miniature whose military is just as brutal, whose critics have been imprisoned or made to "disappear," and whose 3 million people have lived under dictatorship for 10 years.

Now Uruguay, too, is theoretically in the process of a "transition to democracy" announced by a military that lacks the capacity to deal with the country's economic crisis.

Also like Argentina, there are signs that much of this so-called transition may be cosmetic — that the Uruguayan military, which took power by coup in June 1973, will keep a veto over matters of "national security." This can mean anything from school curricula to labor disputes.

One negative signal is the continuing repression of the press. In the 2½ years since the transition was announced the government has ordered more than 35 punitive actions against the media, including temporary closings and permanent shutdowns of newspapers and magazines and detention of journalists and editors.

It was that situation that brought three other North American journalists and me to Montevideo in April. We represented PEN American Center, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Canadian Center for Investigative Journalism.

We found an Orwellian nightmare of military dictatorship.

With totalitarian efficiency, the country's citizens had been classified as A, B or C, depending on whether

they enthusiastically backed the regime, failed to demonstrate support for it or opposed it. The Bs and Cs suffered economic reprisals.

The press is forbidden to refer to the regime as a dictatorship or to say there was ever a coup. It may not attack the "morale" of the military, print information that "threatens order," provoke "contempt for the nation" or its authorities, or mention the existence of nearly 1,000 political prisoners, more than 100 "disappeared" persons and 15,000 people whom the government has "proscribed" from political life.

We learned that, despite the proclaimed transition to democracy, newspapers were not allowed to discuss the most basic matters of public policy and community interest.

La Democracia, the weekly of the Blanco Party, was closed for eight weeks last year for an editorial calling for the resignation of the minister of the economy, an article by a proscribed party leader opposing sale of land to foreigners, and a summary of the party's economic program.

The Christian Democratic weekly, Opción, was shut permanently last October for calling for a blank vote in internal party elections.

Luis Antonio Hierro, deputy editor of Opinar, a weekly of the Colorado Party, was jailed for 17 days in 1981 after he refused to name the individual who supplied him with documents indicating that a university rector had made illegal payments to university employees.

Editors face harassment for dealing with the kinds of local issues that

North American newspapers cover every day. Fernando Miguel Baccaro, editor of the provincial daily El Telégrafo, was concerned that an electric line installed nearly a year before was still not in service. When he printed an article suggesting that people organize a "procession of darkness," he was summoned to police headquarters and charged with planning to disrupt public order.

The prohibitions against attacking military morale, threatening public order or provoking contempt for authorities are so vague that editors have no rules to go by. That has resulted in self-censorship. "Every week we throw one or two articles into the basket," an editor told us. "The other day we had an article critical of the rigidity of education here. We were afraid that it would cost the job of the writer, a professor, or that they would close us."

Reporters and editors who criticize the government live in constant fear of going to jail. At least 15 journalists are in prison, some since the early 1970s. Torturing of prisoners is a routine part of interrogation, according to Amnesty International. Many others have been detained, some more than a dozen times. Reporters are "not the same after interrogation," a journalist told us.

We were told that during the Carter administration the United States Embassy spoke out against rights violations in Uruguay and helped victims of repression. Since President Reagan took office, the embassy has fallen silent.

The writer, a member of the PEN executive board, contributed this comment to the Los Angeles Times.

Uruguay: A Dictatorship in Disguise

By LUCY KOMISAR

TEN years ago, Uruguay was an advanced democracy — a middle-class, 90-per-cent literate welfare state. Now it is an advanced dictatorship — a computerized, totalitarian state. And at a time when turmoil elsewhere in Latin America suggests that only tolerant and pluralistic democratic governments offer any real hope of hemispheric stability, Washington is not using its influence to press for the restoration of Uruguayan democracy.

In June 1973, Uruguay had a military coup. Its leaders had been unable to deal with economic problems, and the Tupamaros — children of the middle and upper classes — had attempted through violence to bring down what they saw as a corrupt, incompetent government. The Uruguayan congress suspended civil liberties to fight the few hundred guerrillas; most legislators remained silent while security forces held suspects *incommunicado* and commonly tortured them. Then, the armed forces turned against the legal Communist and Socialist parties and, finally, against the moderates and Congress itself, which it dissolved.

The dictatorship banned political parties, forbade public meetings, and even required authorizations for sports events and social gatherings. Using the existing identification-card system, it classified people as A, B, or C, according to whether they backed the government, hadn't demonstrated sufficient support, or

Lucy Komisar visited Uruguay in April with three other journalists to gather information for a report on repression of the press issued by the PEN American Center.

avored the opposition. B's and C's found it hard to get jobs. One in every 500 citizens was jailed for political reasons; many were tortured.

The Nixon and Ford Administrations requested military aid for the new government, arguing that military rule in Uruguay was a temporary but necessary phase in the fight against subversion. The U.S. Congress's decision to cut military assistance in 1976 was strongly opposed by President Gerald R. Ford.

BY the late 1970s, however, the economic crisis had forced the military to talk about a return to civilian, democratic rule. And by then, President Jimmy Carter had ended U.S. aid because of Uruguay's human-rights violations.

President Reagan reversed American policy yet again, announcing that the United States would no longer withhold approval for loans to Uruguay from the Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank. U.S. diplomats have also stopped intervening in human-rights cases.

Washington explains its support for the regime by pointing to its claims that it is engaged in a transition to democracy. True, in November 1980, Uruguayans rejected, 59

per cent to 41 per cent, the military's proposed constitution, which would have established a military veto over a promised civilian government. Then in November 1982, voters overwhelmingly chose anti-government delegates to conventions of the two major parties.

But these apparently democratic steps have not made much of a dent in the regime's essentially anti-democratic attitude. Only the moderate Blanco and Colorado parties and the small civic union set up by the military are legally recognized and all but a handful of 15,000 proscribed people, including top Blanco and Colorado leaders and most participants in the 1966 and 1971 elections, are still banned from politics. The press suffers stringent censorship and harassment, including shutdowns of newspapers and detentions of journalists, most of it aimed at nine new publications, including the newspapers of the Blanco and Colorado anti-government factions.

FINALLY, in spite of votes proving that Uruguayans wanted the armed forces back in the barracks, military authorities insisted that a civilian government accept a broad range of repressive measures — including a military veto on national-security matters, a continued ban on most parties, restrictions on the press and trade unions, military justice for people accused of national-security crimes, and a continuation of security forces' "anti-subversive" operations.

The United States acts as if none of this matters. In a statement to

me in Montevideo, Ambassador Thomas J. Aranda, Jr., said Uruguay had taken "important strides in the past year in its transition back to democracy." He cited the November 1982 party elections and the plans for general elections in November 1984. He voiced no criticism of the military's proposals or practices — of closing political parties, detaining opposition leaders, censoring the press, or barring thousands of people from running for office.

The Uruguayan military's goal is to establish the hollow form of democratic government while denying the substance of political liberty and maintaining military power. The United States should not be sending signals that it finds this acceptable.

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