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In Argentina, some fear disappearance of witness may silence others

Jack Chang | McClatchy Newspapers

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LA PLATA, Argentina --]

LA PLATA, Argentina—More than two months ago, bricklayer Jorge Julio Lopez left his house in a working-class neighborhood of this provincial capital and sparked a mystery that's consumed this country.

According to witnesses, the 76-year-old set off by foot that Monday morning toward a commercial area about five blocks away and hasn't been heard from since.

But this isn't a run-of-the-mill missing persons case.

Three decades ago, during Argentina's 1976-1983 dictatorship, police had seized and tortured Lopez during a crackdown on anti-government dissidents. He survived to tell his story this year to a judge trying former police commander Miguel Etchecolatz on charges of ordering Lopez's and others' torture.

The man's testimony and a tour he gave to the judge of the police station where he was held were key to Etchecolatz's conviction and life sentence.

With the two-month anniversary of Lopez's Sept. 18 disappearance having come and gone, many Argentines are convinced that his truth-telling cost him his life. They also fear that his fate could discourage other dictatorship-era victims from testifying against their tormenters in dozens of human rights trials.

"This can't continue to happen in Argentina," said Patricia Walsh, a former federal deputy who wrote legislation that helped knock down the amnesties that had protected dictatorship-era officials.

"We can't continue to have impunity in the disappearance of Jorge Julio Lopez. We are very worried that this could provoke a situation of fear and stop witnesses from speaking against other police."

Suspicion that Lopez may have been seized were bolstered last week when his wife found his key ring in the garden around their house. Witnesses said he'd carried the key ring with him the day he disappeared. A test of its leather showed that it had been in the garden for much less than two months, according to Buenos Aires province investigators.

Guadalupe Godoy, an attorney for Lopez during the trial, said those findings suggested that Lopez's captors placed the key ring as "a threatening message" to other witnesses.

"It's a clear sign that they still enjoy impunity," she said. "We're talking about people who want the world to know what they've done."

Lopez's disappearance comes at a pivotal moment for this 36 million-person country, which is still coming to terms with its bloody past. During its seven years in power, Argentina's military government launched what came to be known as a "dirty war" on suspected leftist guerrillas and dissidents, executing 9,000 to 30,000 people.

A Supreme Court ruling last year annulled the amnesties of hundreds of former police and military officials, opening the way for their trials on human rights charges. More than 260 such officials are under arrest and are awaiting trial.

The British human-rights group Amnesty International reported last month that judges, prosecutors, attorneys, plaintiffs and witnesses have received threatening phone messages demanding that they stop the prosecutions. The boyfriend of one dictatorship-era victim's sister was attacked on the street by two men after he was singled out in a threatening e-mail sent to the victim.

Police investigators say they haven't reached any conclusions about Lopez's whereabouts and have offered a \$65,000 award for information that could help find him. Some Argentines speculate that he could be hiding after the trauma of the trial.

His son, Ruben Lopez, 41, said that was unlikely, since his father had appeared calm the morning of his disappearance and had been looking forward to hearing Etchecolatz's sentence announced the next day.

"There was nothing in his behavior that showed he was being threatened or was at all worried about the case," Ruben Lopez said. "He seemed satisfied with what he had done."

Godoy and other activists have criticized investigators for treating the disappearance as a missing persons case instead of a criminal inquiry.

"They're only looking into where Lopez might be and not investigating the people who clearly did this," she said.

Lopez was expected to testify in other trials. The two-month mark of his disappearance, Nov. 18, was also his 77th birthday.

On the eve of that anniversary, activists projected video of his testimony on one side of the 220-foot-tall obelisk that's at the heart of the capital, Buenos Aires, and broadcast his words down bustling Avenida Corrientes. The capital was plastered with posters demanding his "Appearance Alive."

"This means what we had hoped was done hasn't ended yet," said Elena Sicilia, an actress who marched recently with thousands to the presidential palace demanding Lopez's return. "We still have some people who were part of the dictatorship who still want in some way to stay in power."

Nilda Eloy, who testified against Etchecolatz alongside Lopez, said she feared for her safety but wouldn't stop speaking out against her former tormenters. Government officials have promised to provide witnesses with protection in future trials.

"This only strengthens me," said Eloy, who suffered electric shock and other torture during her captivity. "The fear you don't lose, but the thing is not to let it paralyze you. I am scared, but I won't silence myself. I was already hooded once. Not again."

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