

## NEWS

## Two Argentinean doctors on trial for role in removing babies from mothers

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Two doctors and a midwife are on trial in Buenos Aires for their alleged part in the removal of babies from left wing political prisoners during Argentina's "dirty war" so that they could be brought up by sympathisers of the regime.

The trial is the first attempt to hold medical staff who worked in detention centres under the 1976-1983 military regime to account for their role in what was a deliberate policy to "reorganise" society, ending the family lines of dissidents. An estimated 500 pregnant women were among thousands of people detained for being guerrilla fighters or political opponents of the military government. They were held until they gave birth and then executed or "disappeared," meaning that they are presumed dead but that their bodies have never been found. Their babies were given false identities so that right wing couples could bring them up as their own or pretend that they were legally adopted.

The two doctors, Norberto Bianco and Raul Martin, and the midwife, Yolanda Arroche, are accused of "providing essential assistance" in the systematic theft of nine babies. Between 1976 and 1978 the three worked at the military hospital in Campo de Mayo, the largest armed forces base in the country, just outside Buenos Aires. All now in their 80s, they appeared at the opening of the trial but made no statements and are not expected to continue attending.

Bianco, who was head of the hospital's trauma unit, is accused of having a key role: personally driving pregnant women held in nearby detention centres to the military base to give birth and returning them without their babies. He has already been sentenced in a previous trial for personally "appropriating" one of the newborns.

Martin was head of clinical services at the military hospital and is accused of transmitting information about the pregnant women, and Arroche is accused of signing a fake birth certificate for one of the children.

Five of the nine babies, now adults in their 30s, have discovered their true identities in recent years, thanks to decades of searching by their grandmothers, who set up a charity, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in 1977 to look for them and who have now identified 115 "stolen babies" from DNA tests.

"It's a very important trial, because it will judge the complicity of doctors and midwives who were directly responsible for these crimes against humanity," said 36 year old Francisco Madariaga, who was delivered at Campo de Mayo and taken from his mother, Silvia Quintela, who then disappeared.

"With this trial we'll be able to learn what they did with our mothers the day after we were born and know that there will be a punishment and that justice will triumph, because we are the living proof of the crime," he told Agence France-Presse.

Several former leaders of the military regime, senior military, and police officers were convicted and sentenced in recent years as the masterminds of the policy to steal babies. But this trial is the first for members of civil sectors of society thought to have been complicit, including politicians, landowners, business figures, and medical professionals.

Alan Iud, the lawyer for the grandmothers, said, "There were many more cases involving at least 12 (health) professionals at Campo de Mayo alone." Some have died, some have been excused from trial on the grounds of poor health, and some may yet face trial.

Iud said, "Until now we have tried those who organised the systematic plan to steal babies and those who took in those babes. But these [defendants] were a fundamental link enabling all of that to be carried out."

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