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The French Role in the Use and Export of Torture

We Must Denounce

By CESAR CHELALA

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As the world is reacting with justified condemnation to the tragic events in Paris, the same condemnation should be extended to industrialized countries that have resorted to violence and torture in their recent history. In addition, those countries not only have used these techniques themselves but have exported them to other countries.

France is a case in point. There is ample evidence of the widespread use of torture and assassination of political opponents during that country's occupation of Algeria. Less well-known, however, is that French military officers trained the Argentine military in the psychological and physical torture of political prisoners in Argentina.

In December 2013 died in France French General Paul Aussaresses, who was responsible for executions and torture of prisoners during the Algerian war for independence. A French judge, Roger Le Loire, when investigating the disappearance of French citizens in Argentina during the last military regime, interrogated Gen. Paul Aussaresses about his knowledge of torture techniques provided by his soldiers to the Argentine military.

Aussaresses' testimony helped draw a picture of the French military's role in teaching torture to their Argentine colleagues. Aussaresses defended his use of torture during the Algerian War in the book "The Battle of the Casbah," and argued for torture in the fight against al-Qaida. "I express regrets," he said in a 2001 interview, "But I cannot express remorse. That implies guilt. I consider I did my difficult duty of a soldier implicated in a difficult mission."

Aussaresses stated that the French government insisted that the French military in Algeria “liquidate the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale) as quickly as possible.” Following the controversy fueled by his statements, he was stripped of his rank, the right to wear his uniform and his Légion d’honneur.

Aussaresses had close links with the Brazilian military. According to Gen. Manuel Contreras, former head of the Chilean DINA (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia), Chilean officers were trained in Brazil by Aussaresses. He also advised South American militaries on battles against counterinsurgency and on the use of torture.

Lt. Col. Roger Trinquier was reportedly the architect of brutal repression in Algeria and the development of the concept of “modern war.” One of that concept’s basic tenets was the “secrecy doctrine,” which was to cause havoc in Argentina during the last military regime that ruled that country.

An important premise of that doctrine was the need to maintain strict secrecy with regard to the detention of political prisoners, as well as their death, and to ensure the elimination of all corpses. Many were dumped in the ocean; some later washed ashore on Argentine and Uruguayan beaches.

The use of military personnel dressed as civilians, looking for political opponents to interrogate and torture, was a technique implemented by the French in Indochina and Algeria, and later exported to Argentina through French military advisers. In Argentina, these techniques led to the “disappearance” of some 30,000 political prisoners in the 1970s, almost all of whom are still unaccounted for.

The justification, according to French officials for this “assistance” is that it had been requested by the Argentine government. As Pierre Messmer, a former Gaullist prime minister, stated, “Argentina wanted the advisers so we gave them what they wanted. Argentina is an independent country and there was no reason for us to deny their request.” He was thus indicating that training in repression wasn’t the isolated decision of a few but a definite state policy.

If there is a moral to this sad story, it is that no country, no matter how technically advanced, is free of the dangers inherent in the use of brutal repressive techniques and their export. And it is the duty of informed citizens to denounce these vicious policies.