

Argentina

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Query:

What are the political, economic and human rights conditions in Argentina following the economic crisis of 2002?

Response:

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

Four years of recession, a run on the banks and a freeze on bank accounts led to widespread demonstrations and looting, at least 30 people killed by police and business owners, and the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa of the Radical Civic Union (UCR) on 20 December 2001 (CHICAGO TRIBUNE 6 January 2002, IPS 15 February 2002, GUARDIAN 7 June 2002).

After three interim presidents in a matter of days, the first of whom declared a default on much of the nation's public debt, the Congress on 1 January 2002 named Peronist Eduardo Duhalde as President to complete de la Rúa's term that runs until December 2003 (AMERICAN PROSPECT 28 January 2002, CHICAGO TRIBUNE 6 January 2002).

The Duhalde government maintained the freeze on bank accounts and ended the one-to-one pegging of the Argentine peso to the dollar, setting off a steep devaluation of the currency and massive protests that have continued on and off with varying degrees of intensity (AFP 26 January 2002, GUARDIAN 7 June 2002).

Some analysts are concerned about an authoritarian backlash in reaction to an angry, dispossessed middle class and a newly impoverished working class. Persistent rumors of a military coup have been dismissed by government and military authorities. The head of the armed forces has not ruled out military intervention "within the framework of the constitution and the law" in response to social upheaval (GUARDIAN 7 June 2002, EFE 22 April).

In May 2002, amid continuing street protests, two small explosive devices were detonated by unknown people at foreign-owned banks in Buenos Aires, causing minor damages and no injuries (Reuters 8 May 2002).

ECONOMIC AND FISCAL CONDITIONS

The nation of about 36 million people has been in recession for more than four years; as of

early June the economy was contracting at a rate of about 15 percent per year (CHICAGO TRIBUNE 6 January 2002, Reuters 10 June 2002, GUARDIAN 7 June 2002).

The peso has fallen more than 70 percent since January and was at about 3.7 pesos to a dollar during the first week in June, meaning that people's savings, changed by law into pesos, had been cut to about 28 cents on the dollar (GUARDIAN, Reuters 9 June 2002 and 6 June 2002).

There are now about fifteen local script currencies being printed by bankrupt provincial governments, while up to 2.5 million people are participating in 5,000 barter clubs, with 4 million projected by the end of the year (GUARDIAN, AP 31 May 2002).

Since the default on a substantial portion of the government's \$140 billion public debt, Argentina remains cut off from international financial markets; renewed access depends on cutting national and provincial spending to reach a long delayed agreement with the IMF (Reuters 7 June 2002, 8 June 2002 and 9 June 2002).

In early June it was announced that banks would be given the option to return to depositors their frozen savings or to offer them bonds in exchange, but details were still to be worked out (GUARDIAN 7 June 2002, Reuters 9 June 2002).

Inflation was running at only 21 percent at the end of May, restrained by the freeze on bank accounts; however, the price of basic food staples was rising at about 70 percent (Reuters 28 May 2002 and 29 May 2002).

SOCIAL INDICATORS

Unemployment: The number of people completely out of work climbed from 20 percent at the end of 2001 to 25 percent by early June 2002, with another 20 percent of the now underemployed; sociologist and economic analyst Artemio López recently projected 30 percent unemployment and 25 percent underemployment by the end of 2002, while estimating that only about 30 percent of the population has sufficient income to buy anything other than essential goods (Reuters 6 June 2002, CHICAGO TRIBUNE 6 January 2002, GUARDIAN 7 June 2002).

Poverty: According to official figures, the percentage of the population now living below the poverty line is 51.4 percent, having risen from less than 10 percent in the 1970s, to about 15 percent in the 1980s, 30 percent in 1998 and 40 percent in December 2001. The current level of 51.4 percent is about the same as in El Salvador. Of those in poverty today, 42.6 percent are indigent—unable to afford basic food and clothing—compared to 1998 when 29 percent of the poor were indigent (CLARÍN, 9 June 2002).

Poverty affecting children: As of June 2002, according to official figures, 66.6 percent of those under the age of 18, or 8.32 million youths, were living below the poverty level, with nearly half of them indigent and those in the 6-to-12 age bracket the most affected. Poverty levels for children are now as high as 80 percent in the northern provinces, and nearly 70 percent in Buenos Aires and the surrounding metropolitan area (CLARÍN, 9 June 2002).

Half of all infants now suffer from anemia and a quarter of children suffer from malnutrition; teachers in Buenos Aires report that children from poor families are fainting in class from hunger (GUARDIAN 7 June 2002, OBSERVER 19 May 2002, Reuters 14 May 2002).

In the UNDP's HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2001, issued in July 2001 and covering 2000, Argentina ranked 34th in the Human Development Index, fourth in the Western hemisphere behind Canada (3rd), the United States (6th) and Barbados (31st) (UNDP).

HUMAN RIGHTS CONDITIONS

The principal human rights concerns are: torture and ill-treatment of detainees by law enforcement and prison officers; killings by police using excessive lethal force in the context of public demonstrations; reports of extrajudicial killings by federal and provincial police; and the lack of effective and conclusive investigations of such rights violations (AI 1 March 2002, HRW 2002).

According to the leader of an Amnesty International mission to Argentina in February 2002, from January 2001 to January 2002, there were more than 900 denunciations of torture and ill treatment by the police, with many coming during the mass protests in December 2001 (IPS 15 February 2002).

Rights groups also have expressed concern about the lack of security for witnesses in cases against law enforcement that have come to court and reports that lawyers, judges, human rights defenders, journalists and relatives of victims are threatened and harassed (AI 1 March 2002).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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