



American ideals. Universal values.

March 11, 2016

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

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Dear President Obama:

On March 23rd you will make your first presidential visit to Argentina. Your visit coincides with the 40th anniversary of the coup that brought a brutal military regime to power, which ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. Unfortunately, for at least part of that period, the United States government supported the dictatorship. An estimated 30,000 people were killed or “disappeared” by the regime during what has come to be known as Argentina’s “Dirty War.”

As President of the United States, you have shown great courage and moral leadership by acknowledging and supporting the release of information about our country’s own past violations, including the torture and cruel treatment of detainees in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Your acknowledgement of and unequivocal order to end such practices enabled our country to turn the page on a dark chapter in its history.

To ensure that there is no question about where our country stands on these issues, however, it is important not only to acknowledge violations committed by our government; we must also confront our past complicity in human rights abuses abroad. While it was committing horrific abuses against its own people, the Argentine military dictatorship enjoyed significant support from at least some U.S. government agencies. Today, the people of Argentina continue to struggle with the legacy of the dictatorship’s widespread and horrific abuses. Many children of murdered victims of the regime who were abducted and raised by military leaders have still not been identified; many perpetrators of atrocities continue to enjoy impunity.

The United States is in a unique position to assist the survivors of this brutal period in Argentina’s history by releasing government documents that pertain to it. These documents may reveal important facts—what happened to victims of the dictatorship, who was responsible for specific violations, and clues that will help abducted children, now grown, reunite with their families. The Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, a prominent group of grandmothers of the abducted

children who have worked tirelessly to locate them, in coordination with other human rights organizations in Argentina, have been seeking documentation of what happened to their children and grandchildren for many years. Still-classified documents in United States archives could provide them critical evidence.

In 2000, during a visit to Argentina, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright promised to declassify and release State Department documents relating to that period, and the administration of President George W. Bush followed through on that pledge in 2002. The U.S. government did not, however, release documents in the possession of the CIA, the Department of Defense, or the FBI.

Opponents of declassification may be concerned that the release of additional documents could embarrass the United States. But in the late 1990s, the U.S. government undertook a similar multi-agency declassification of documents related to the Chilean dictatorship without adverse consequences to the United States. Not only was release of the Chilean documents the right thing to do, but it also helped to repair relations between the United States and the Chilean people, as the United States made a visible and meaningful gesture to support human rights in Latin America and to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Human Rights First documented the “disappearances” of lawyers in Argentina in 1979 and has been working to end the use of torture worldwide. We have wholeheartedly supported and applauded your efforts to end torture by the United States and to cast light on abuses that occurred after the attacks of 9/11, so that torture never again becomes the policy of our country. We ask you now to assist the people of Argentina in their efforts to cast light on the human rights abuses that occurred during the dictatorship there. Declassifying U.S. documents will help the people of Argentina understand the scope and consequences of the regime’s abuses, while also helping them acknowledge, mourn, and recover from that troubling and traumatic period.

Argentina has a new, democratically-elected government that appears eager to work with and develop strong ties to the United States. An announcement from you that the United States, on the 40th anniversary of the onset of these atrocities, will help Argentina come to terms with its past by releasing these long-secret U.S. documents would represent a strong gesture of support for the new government, for the people of Argentina, and for the cause of human rights around the world.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,



Elisa Massimino