

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Move over machismo, women defense ministers new trend in South America

The Associated Press

Saturday, January 27, 2007

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

South America's leaders are increasingly naming women as their defense ministers, putting them in charge of keeping the peace in nations still grappling with legacies of military dictatorships.

And guess what? The region is seeing a surge in human rights cases as civilian governments pursue suspected abusers and torturers from past dictatorships. The women are fulfilling tough roles and breaking down barriers for future generations.

Take Argentina, for example. Thirty years after coup-plotting generals helped install a dictatorship, leftist Nilda Garre was seated as the country's first female minister of defense.

On Friday, she announced that former military officers could no longer use the cloak of state secrecy laws as an excuse not to testify about illegal abductions, torture and disappearances under junta rule.

"The rules of secrecy cannot be transformed in to an obstacle to truth and justice," she declared in announcing a presidential decree that will compel more officers to testify.

Hundreds of cases of rights violations from Argentina's "Dirty War" are now being investigated since the country's amnesty laws were struck down in 2005.

Garre also cracked down on outspoken former officers still supportive of the past junta, reprimanding one this week for stepping out of line.

Across the Andes, Chilean Defense Minister Vivianne Blanlot was booed loudly when she went as the government's envoy to the military funeral for ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet, who died in December at 91.

"Go away, go away!" hundreds of Pinochet's mourners chanted. Blanlot stayed put, not twitching a muscle.

"I was not the one who had to leave, but them," Blanlot declared. "I'm the one who is in charge."

The next day she stripped Pinochet's grandson of his army captaincy for defending Pinochet's iron-fisted rule at his funeral eulogy.

Her predecessor Michele Bachelet, a socialist and former torture victim, faced similar challenges as defense minister, parlaying public respect for her role into election as Chile's first woman president.



The Times Center

A new space for a new century. Available for events starting Fall 2007.

Reserve now.

In Uruguay, Defense Minister Azucena Berruti, a socialist and lawyer who defended political prisoners during the 1973-1985 military rule, did not hesitate to sack her army chief last year for unauthorized meetings with political foes of the president.

The wave of female defense heads is especially surprising a hemisphere known for its machismo. But the perennially poverty stricken region is changing fast. In many countries newly elected leftists are reaching out to appoint women, lots of them, to Cabinet posts. Some observers say it's a sign of maturity in once shaky democracies.

Having broken through the glass ceiling, they're clearing the way for others. This year Chile's naval academy will get its first women for officer training, making it necessary to refit of the military training ship Esmeraldo for women sailors. The army already has women officers, and the air force has some fighter pilots.

But not all the female defense leaders have succeeded, or had a chance to.

In Ecuador, the country's first female defense minister, Guadalupe Larriva, was killed in a helicopter crash a month after her appointment in December. Larriva, 50, was one of seven women in a Cabinet of 17 and reportedly had the full support of the military in the fragile Andean nation.

In Colombia, where a four-decade-old leftist insurgency is Latin America's longest, Defense Minister Martha Lucia Ramirez abruptly resigned in November 2003. Some speculated that feuding with the generals had made her job impossible.

One Argentine political analyst, Rosendo Fraga, said none of the female defense heads have really been put to the test.

"When one has to lead in conflicts that is one thing, but in other countries they are just dealing with the scourges of the past," he said.

But whether or not crises or conflagrations arise, Latin Americans weary and ready to move beyond the decades of dictatorship can be certain of one thing, more and more women will be calling the shots.

Associated Press writers Eva Vergara in Chile, Alfonso Castiglia in Uruguay and Gonzalo Solano in Ecuador contributed to this report.

ADVERTISER LINKS

Fanfare Trumpeters

Fanfare & heralding trumpeters for theme parties & wedding ceremonies

www.Bandsourceproductions.com

HTC Herald P4350 - \$599

Unlocked- Works On All GSM Networks In Stock - Same Day Shipping

www.networkingrus.com

Herald Square Hotels

Directory Of Luxury Accommodation. Find Herald Square Hotels Quickly.

LuxuryResorts101.com

HTC P4350 (Herald)

Buy This Windows Mobile Device Unlocked At MobilePlanet!

www.mobileplanet.com



Copyright © 2007 The International Herald Tribune | www.iht.com