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"We have learned that  
change cannot come through  
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### Argentina Mothers of Plaza de Mayo: Living legacy of hope and human rights

Marie Trigona – Women News Network – WNN



Mother of Plaza de Mayo on the 34th anniversary of the military coup, she holds a sign of her son and daughter-in-law who became part of 'the disappeared' on July 29, 1976.  
Image: Marie Trigona/WNN

(WNN) ARGENTINA: Buenos Aires city center, known as Plaza de Mayo, has been a site of protest for decades. It is here that the Mothers of Argentina's 'disappeared,' begin their weekly march in the capital plaza every Thursday afternoon.

Known as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, they have passed down a legacy in defending human rights as they walk steadily together around the plaza to show the world that they still have not forgotten what happened to their loved ones during what has been called, 'Argentina's Dirty War.'

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo have been integral to recent investigations and discoveries in what have been called 'crimes against humanity' in the more than 30,000 estimated missing sons and daughters who became part of 'the disappeared' during the reign of Argentina's military juntas from 1975 to 1983.

"I keep on looking for my children and everybody else's children, because to me your daughter is my daughter, she's a little bit mine. My children are a little bit yours," said Carmen Robles de Zurita, a woman who is the Mother of two missing children: Her son, Nestro Juan Agustín Zurita, abducted at the age of 25, August 1, 1975; and Carmen's daughter, María Rosa Zurita, abducted at the age of 21, November 1, 1975.

Now after three decades, justice is finally possible in criminal courts. Thanks to the investigations carried out by victims' families and human rights activists, Argentina's government is now revisiting its dark past with landmark Supreme



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Court human rights tribunals, following the 2003 removal of amnesty laws that protected members of the military government from prosecution of human rights abuses.

### The Motor of Society

“The disappearance of people created a paralysis in society,” says Dr. Rodolfo Mattarollo, international law and human rights expert.

*“Today we still don’t have the complete truth or information as to what happened to our children.”*

- Marta Ocampo de Vazquez,  
President of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo – Founding Line

On April 30, 1977, fourteen mothers gathered in the large plaza in front of the government building. The dictatorship prohibited people from gathering in public places, so they began walking around the pyramid in the center of the plaza. As more women joined the rounds, having visited police stations, prisons, judicial offices and churches, but finding no answers, the Mothers began to identify themselves by wearing white head scarves to symbolize the diapers of their lost and ‘disappeared’ children.

“Today we still don’t have the complete truth or information as to what happened to our children,” says Marta Ocampo de Vazquez, president of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo – Founding Line. “Who gave the order? Who executed them? What was our children’s final destiny?” she asks.

Nothing could stop the Mothers protest, not even physical attacks or endless threats. In 1977, three of the founding Mothers and two French nuns, who supported the efforts of the Mothers, also became part of ‘the disappeared.’

“It surprises me when I see what I am today. Before I was a shy cry-baby. I had no political consciousness. I didn’t have any kind of consciousness. All that interested me was that my children were well. I was one of those mothers who went everywhere with their children. If they organized dances at the school to collect money, I was the one who was selling tickets. I was involved in everything my children did. You only become conscious when you lose something. When the Mothers first met we used to cry a lot and then we began to shout and demand, and nothing mattered anymore, except that we should find out children. Now I fight, I shout, I push if I have to, I kick but I still wonder to myself how I could have gone into those military buildings with all those guns pointed at my head,” said Mother, Margareta de Oro in an interview with author, Josephine Fisher, for the book, ‘Mothers of the Disappeared.’

### The Pain of the Past

Alfredo Ignacio Astiz, a 22 year old Argentine Naval lieutenant and intelligence officer, infiltrated the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo posing as ‘Gustavo Niño,’ a brother of one of the disappeared. Astiz’s infiltration would haunt the Mothers and the nation for decades to come. The Mothers say today they still remember young “Gustavo,” who attended meetings of family members and marched with them.

*“I keep on looking for my children and everybody else’s children.”*

- Mother of Plaza de Mayo, Carmen Robles de Zurita

On December 8, 1977, the Mothers – Esther Ballestrino de Careaga and Maria Eugenia Ponce de Bianco – were forcefully taken, along with eight others, by military officials as they were attending a meeting at the Santa Cruz Church in Buenos Aires. Azucena Villaflor, another founding Mother, was also kidnapped outside her home just days later.

Two days later, on December 10, eight hundred and thirty-four Mothers

signatures were printed on an almost full page petition advertisement in “La Nacion,” Argentina’s daily newspaper. The ad pleaded for justice asking Argentine officials to open up and investigate cases of their missing children.



On the 30th anniversary (December 8, 2007) of the disappearance of the mothers from the Santa Cruz Church, Mother of Plaza de Mayo, Elia Espen, kneels at a memorial stone dedicated to the Mothers who lost their life. Image: Marie Trigona

Two weeks following the secret raid on the Santa Cruz Church, only one week after the December 15 afternoon march of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, five dead female bodies washed up on the shore of the Río de la Plata (the River Plate). The River Plate is a wide expansive river which borders both Argentina and Uruguay as it opens to the Atlantic Ocean.

“The Mothers had planned a major turnout, at their usual Thursday afternoon demonstration on Dec 15, but the abduction of members of the Mother’s group had a chilling effect on attendance,” said the American Embassy in Buenos Aires in a 1977 (then classified) report to the U.S. State Department.

“An additional sheet of signatures for that petition, as well as \$250 of funds collected to pay for the advertisement were taken during the abduction,” outlined the Embassy.

In the early 1990s, on the edge of new breakthroughs in forensic science, it finally became possible to recover and identify DNA from skeletal remains. Genetic testing quickly became a critical tool in human rights investigations worldwide.

In 2005, through detailed forensic investigations of skeletal remains, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF), was able to use DNA and forensic evidence to identify four of the washed-up bodies. It was decided without any doubt. The bodies belonged to three of the founding Mothers – Azucena Villaflor, Maria Eugenia Ponce and Esther Careaga, along with the French nun, Léonie Duquet.

*“Everywhere we work we have seen the incredible pain and paralysis that a disappearance produces for a family.”*

- Mercedes Doretti,  
co-founder of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF)

“The remains of the four women are thought to have been thrown into the ocean from Air Force planes. The bodies washed out on the shore in 1977 and were buried as “N.N.” (unknowns) in the General Lavalle municipal cemetery, province of Buenos Aires,” a 2006 Annual EAAF Report explained. “EAAF exhumed the four women from General Lavalle cemetery and identified them based on anthropological and genetic analysis.”

“Everywhere we work we have seen the incredible pain and paralysis that a disappearance produces for a family. Recovering the remains is not enough to erase the pain of the past but it is a huge part of healing and a crucial form of reparations. Families need it. In fact, we think that too often the recovery and

identification of remains is not viewed enough as an integral part of the reparations process," said Mercedes Doretti, co-founder of EAAF.

Twenty-eight years after the founding Mothers themselves 'disappeared,' on December 8, 2005, the remains of Azucena Villaflor, Maria Ponce de Bianco and Esther Ballestrino de Careaga were cremated and their ashes buried in honor at Buenos Aires, Plaza de Mayo.

### Breaking Walls of Impunity

Since Argentina's seven year bloody military dictatorship, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo have endlessly searched for truth, transparency and accountability. Today the Mothers have succeeded to break the walls of impunity as a wide international symbol of non-violent action.

The 1986, Argentina Full Stop law and the 1987 Due Obedience law was "used to obstruct the investigation of thousands of cases of forced disappearance, torture and extrajudicial execution committed between 1976 and 1983 when the military governments were in power," said the International Commission of Jurists and Amnesty International in a 2003 Legal Memorandum. These laws were a deep blow to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who resisted the government's attempt to use amnesty laws to pardon military actions and human rights abuses.

*"As the youth today take up our banner, the 30,000 'disappeared' will never be 'disappeared.' They will be present."*

- 2010 statement by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo

Today, alternating between years of amnesty and arrest, Alfredo Ignacio Astiz is facing a stepped up Supreme Court battle. He is facing investigation along with seventeen other officers and officials. In addition to individual crimes, the Court is also investigating charges of 'crimes against humanity' committed between 1976 – 1983 at the ESMA Navy Mechanics School in Buenos Aires.

Known as the largest and most notorious torture center in Argentina during the nation's 'dark years,' the ESMA Navy Mechanics School has been linked to more than 5,000 people, who's fate has brought them to become part of 'the disappeared.'

(Now) "The military are having the trials that our children never had," said Mother of Plaza de Mayo Truth Commissioner, Nora Cortinas. Nora's son, Carlos Gustavo Cortiñas, was an economy student who became part of 'the disappeared' on April 15, 1977.

Because many of the mothers are now in their 80s, some worry that they will not live to see the former Argentine military machine held responsible for its crimes.

"What we want is for the trials to speed up a little bit and not be tried on a case by case basis; and that the government takes responsibility to help end the threats against witnesses, judges, and lawyers, so that we can really say that there's justice in this country," added Mother Cortinas.

*"I was one of those mothers who went everywhere with their children. If they organized dances at the school to collect money, I was the one who was selling tickets. I was involved in everything my children did. You only become conscious when you lose something."*

- Mother of Plaza de Mayo, Margareta de Oro

Mother, Ocampo de Vazquez, now 81, has gone through decades of struggle and frustration. But she knows her long campaign to find the truth must continue. "I don't see an end in sight," she exclaimed.

"We resist because there are crimes unpunished and questions about the

disappearances left unanswered,” says Ines Ragni, a Mother from the southern province of Neuquén. The Mother’s slogan, “Never Again,” was adopted by the Mothers with the hope that Argentina and other countries in the region, including Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, who have also suffered from military dictatorship, would never repeat their own dark chapters in history.

“Our children wanted to live, but their lives were taken away. The youth in the street protesting today are part of the memory of our children,” echo the Mothers.

“As the youth today take up our banner, the 30,000 ‘disappeared’ will never be ‘disappeared.’ They will (always) be present.”

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***This historic video shows the desperation of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in the early days of their campaign in the 1970s. By reaching journalists around the world, the actions and voice of the Mothers began to bring light to the the terrible plight of the families of ‘the disappeared’ in Argentina.***

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**Truth Commissioner Nora Morales de Cortinas, co-founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, speaks of our world humanity and truth at the National Truth Commission for the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign in Cleveland, Ohio. July 15, 2006.**

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**Bones and human rights: Mercedes Doretti, co-founder of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, talks with The Economist magazine about investigating human-rights violations in Argentina. This is a January 2011, 8:46 min, [The Economist magazine](#) video production.**

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**For more information on this topic go to:**

- ["Building Bridges of Memory: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Cultural Politics of Maternal Memories,"](#) History and Anthropology, Vol. 15, No.2, Margaret E. Burchianti, June 2004
  - ["Silhouettes of the Disappeared: Memory, Justice and Human Rights in Post-Authoritarian Argentina,"](#) Vincent Druliolle, Department of Government at the University of Essex with Denver University, June 2009
- 

Investigative journalist, Marie Trigona, has focused on stories covering Argentina. Her work has appeared in The Buenos Aires Herald, Canadian Dimension, Dollars and Sense and many other publications. She is also a reporter for Free Speech Radio News, a daily syndicated radio news program, broadcast from the U.S.

Additional material for this article has been provided by Women News Network – WNN.

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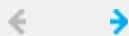
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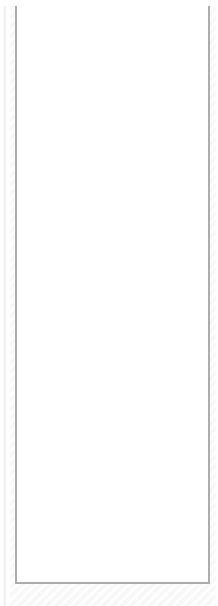


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