Enrique Rodriguez Larreta Kidnapped in Buenos Aires

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'For two months they had maltreated me, tortured me, kept me handcuffed and blindfolded; I had eaten badly, slept on the floor covered with just a filthy blanket and had no news about my family, who in turn must have thought me dead – all this without being accused of any crime.'

This is how Enrique Larreta sums up his terrifying ordeal at the hands of the Argentinian and Uruguayan security forces in the summer and autumn of last year. A 55-year-old journalist with an unblemished record and no political involvement of any kind, he went to Buenos Aires in July 1976 to search for his son, who had disappeared. The son, also a journalist, 26 years old and married with a five-year-old child, had been living in Argentina for the past three years. He had been a student leader in Uruguay and was arrested by the Army in 1972, held incommunicado for nine months, interrogated and tortured, before being released as there was no evidence against him. Until his disappearance he had worked for the Buenos Aires newspaper, El Cronista Comercial.

Enrique Larreta joined his daughter-in-law

in attempting to trace the missing journalist and to secure his release. On 2 July he presented a writ of habeas corpus, requesting the court that the police, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, and the other security forces be asked about his whereabouts. A few days later he was told that the authorities had no record of his son and that he had not been detained.

Enrique Larreta then contacted a number of organisations, including the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the Episcopal Council, and Dr Abelardo Rossi, a member of the Court of Justice. Everyone assured him of their sympathies but said they were unable to help. A member of the Supreme Court pointed out that on the same day over six thousand writs of habeas corpus had been received in cases similar to his. Undeterred, he wrote letters to various individuals and institutions, and he publicised his son's disappearance in Buenos Aires newspapers.

What follows is an abbreviated version of Enrique Larreta's statement, which he made at the London offices of Amnesty International during his visit to England in March this year.

On the night of 13 July, a group of between eight and twelve armed men gained admission to the apartment block in which my son and daughter-in-law lived. After breaking down the door they handcuffed my daughter-in-law and myself, disregarding our protests and without offering any explanation. Our heads were covered with hoods and, still in our nightclothes, we were pushed out of the house and locked in a waiting van.

We were driven to another address and, after waiting for a few minutes, another couple were pushed in with us. We were then taken to a

building where they had to raise a noisy metal roll-up door for the van to enter.

Inside, making no response to my repeated demands for an explanation other than further blows and insults, they demanded to see my identification. There was a large number of people in a similar situation to mine in the building; among them, I recognised my son, partly by his voice and partly because, the sugar bag they had used to hood me not being very tightly woven, I was able to distinguish outlines. Later on, one of the guards noticed that I could see a little, so he punched me and bound my eyes tightly with a rag.

Two others whom I managed to recognise were Margarita Michelini, the daughter of my friend, Senator Zelmar Michelini, assassinated a short time before, and León Duarte, the Uruguayan workers' leader who was very active in the trade union movement.

Some of the people were immediately taken upstairs for interrogation. From the heartrending screams that could constantly be heard, I gathered that they were being tortured; this was confirmed when I heard them brought down again to the place where I was being kept. The guards dragged them along, moaning, and flung them on the concrete floor; they were forbidden any water, as they 'had been in the machine'.

The following night it was my turn to be led upstairs, where I was questioned under torture like the other men and women who were there. I was completely stripped and, with arms pinioned behind me, hung by the wrists some 20-30 centimetres above the floor. They then put on me a sort of loincloth containing a number of electric terminals. When this is connected, the victim receives electric shocks in several places at once. This apparatus, which they called 'the machine', was connected while I was interrogated,

threatened and beaten in the most sensitive parts. The ground beneath me was soaked and strewn with coarse salt crystals, in order to intensify the pain if the victim succeeded in resting his feet on the ground. Several of them came loose from the rigging, falling heavily to the floor and being severely injured. I remember one case in particular; I found out later that the victim was Edelweiss Zahn de Andrés.

I was questioned about my son's political activities and my participation in the Party for the Victory of the People to which, according to my interrogators, he had belonged. I cannot say exactly how long I was tortured – I think it was not longer than half an hour – but in most cases it lasted, by my reckoning, from two to three hours.

After undergoing this treatment (during which, when heavy perspiration caused my blindfold to slip a little, I caught sight of a fair-sized portrait of Adolf Hitler hanging on the wall) I was returned to the lower floor, where I then remained until I was moved to Uruguay. The sanitary conditions in the place were lamentable. It looked

like an abandoned car workshop, judging by the grease and dirt underfoot, and there was only one small toilet for almost thirty detainees. On several occasions I heard the voices of other people held on the upper floor, asking for food or water, or to go to the toilet. Among them I clearly recognised the voice of Gerardo Gatti Antuna, whom I had known for a long time as a trade union leader of the Uruguayan printing workers. From what the prisoners said—when the guards were a bit slack, we were able to exchange a few whispered words—I discovered that another of the voices upstairs belonged to Hugo Méndez, another Uruguayan trade unionist, kidnapped in Buenos Aires in June 1976.

As the days passed, I perceived from their conversation and the idioms they used that the great majority of the kidnappers and all our guards were Argentinian. But personnel of the Uruguayan Army participated directly in the interrogations and torture. Some were said to belong to a group called ocoa (Anti-Subversive Operations Coordinating Organisation). When talking among themselves they identified one another by the name of Oscar, followed by a number. Oscar 1 was a high-ranking officer, possibly about 45 years old, of medium height, thick-set and with white hair; he was nicknamed El tordillo (the dappled one). I managed to hear some ten numbers, corresponding to officers with the rank of captain or above. From what they said I surmised that several of them lived permanently in Argentina.

Working with the OCOA people were officers of the Defence Intelligence Service (sm), some of whom told us it was 'Division 300'. The chief of the Division was a Colonel Ramirez, referred to as No. 301. The operations chief of the Division was Major Gavazzo (302), who was in charge of the torture, together with 'Oscar 1'. Division 300 apparently consisted of approximately 60 people, officers and men. No. 303 was identi-

fied as Major Manuel Cordero, No. 304 was a cavalry major called Martinez, and No. 305 was a Major Silveira.

There were Division 300 troops in the building in which we were imprisoned. The two principal members were referred to by the pseudonyms 'Daniel' (a sergeant) and 'Dracula' (a lance-corporal). It was they who packed up all the goods stolen during the raids—what they called 'the spoils of battle'—for transport to Uruguay.

Their booty included dismantled cars, refrigerators, television sets, typewriters, calculators, domestic appliances, crockery, bicycles and books.

On 15 July 1976 three other abductees were brought in. I discovered that they were the lawyer, Manuela Santucho, Carlos Santucho (sister and brother of Mario Roberto Santucho) and Carlos's sister-in-law whose name I cannot recall but whom the guards called 'Beba'.

On 19 July we were told of the death, in an armed confrontation, of Mario Roberto Santucho. By this time, Carlos Santucho and his sister-in-law seemed to have lost their sanity as a result of the brutal torture. Dr Manuela Santucho remained lucid, although she too had been savagely tortured.

At about 6 p.m. that day they began filling a large water tank, which had been placed among the prisoners. The water could be heard running. Meanwhile, officers and guards alike began to insult and maltreat the prisoners, blaming us for the death of a captain in the armed confrontation and saying that they were going to 'wash everybody's head' in the tank. During the night, under the pretext that Carlos Santucho was raving, they pounced on him and bound him with chains. They had previously put a sliding apparatus on top of the tank and fixed it to the roof, explaining its use minutely. A rope was passed round this apparatus, tied to the chains that bound Santucho. This, too, was explained to us in detail.

An Argentinian officer produced a copy of the Buenos Aires newspaper Clarín, which described how Mario Roberto Santucho had died. Manuela Santucho was made to read this out to us. Meanwhile, Carlos was repeatedly lowered into the tank full of water, to the accompaniment of insults and hoots of laughter, and beaten furiously each time he emerged. He suffered this treatment for a long time-to our surprise, since the guards themselves had been heard to say he had never been politically active. Noticing that the body no longer showed any sign of life, they untied him, put him in a vehicle and took him away. Manuela Santucho and her sister-in-law stayed with us a couple of days more, then they too were removed.

The chief of the Argentinian detachment is a high-ranking officer whose subordinates call him El Jova or El Jovato, which means 'the old man' in Buenos Aires slang. When we had arrived at our place of detention, he had asked for details of identification. Through the hood covering my head I could see that he was between 50 and 55, about 1.75m in height, of an energetic appearance with short, greying hair. He was wearing boots, riding trousers and military combat clothing.

The place where we were detained had a wide roll-up metal door which made a loud noise every time a vehicle went in or out. The arrival of vehicles was announced to the guards by radio a few minutes beforehand with the code words 'Operation Sesame'. The room on the ground floor was large, between six and eight metres wide and some 25 or 30m long. It had been divided with limed sacking. On the wall to my right, by the entrance, there was a small toilet without a bowl, and a small washbasin. At the side of the toilet there was a sink. The staircase leading up to the top floor was also situated at the side of the toilet. It had a cement base and thick wooden steps. The staircase seemed to be of later date than the rest of the house. On the top floor there were at least three rooms and a kitchen.

At certain times of day we could hear children's voices and laughter, which indicated that there was a school in the vicinity. A railway line ran near the front of the house. On the corner of the street, according to one of the guards whom I overheard talking about it, there was a car workshop.

On 26 July they told us that we were going to be transferred. We had already been told this three days earlier but, according to the guards, the plane in which we were to travel did not arrive because of bad weather conditions and the flight had to be postponed. Adhesive tape was put over our eyes and mouths, and all the detainees except me had their hands handcuffed behind their backs. (They didn't handcuff me because of an inflammation on my left wrist which had infected a cut caused by the handcuffs I had worn earlier.) Instead, they secured my hands with adhesive tape.

We were made to get into a lorry and sit on the floor. They then put some planks of wood

above our heads, supported by the sides of the lorry, thus forming a kind of platform. On this they placed a large number of packages and boxes containing looted goods. Judging by their comments, they had already made four such journeys. Thus we left the house in which we had been detained. Gerardo Gatti, León Duarte and Hugo Méndez remained behind, and I haven't heard of them since.

The lorry which took us away was heavily guarded, judging by the motorcycles and cars escorting us, which sounded their sirens at the crossroads to break into the traffic. They drove us to the military base adjacent to Buenos Aires airport. The perspiration caused by the confined space and the drizzle, which was now beginning to fall, had loosened the adhesive tape and I was able to see a little.

On arrival they made us get into a Fairchild plane – the sort used by the Uruguayan Air Force, TAMU (Uruguayan Military Transport) and PLUNA (National Airlines). Some of the people who travelled with me could see the PLUNA emblem on the polythene bags in the seat pockets. I estimated that the flight lasted about an hour. On descent I noticed that we were in No. 1 military air base, adjacent to the National Airport of Carrasco in the suburbs of Montevideo.

They made me get into a medium-sized car and lie down on the back seat, covering me with a blanket. In the car were three other people, who seemed to be officials - two in front and another with me in the back. The car broke down on the way, and I had to get into another one following us; this caused a delay which made us arrive late at our destination. There, the car went straight into a garage. I was made to get out and enter the house. When they had identified me, they put me in a small room and removed the adhesive tape from my hands. After locking the door they told me I could take the tape off my eyes and mouth and have a bath. I found that I was in an extremely clean bathroom, without a tub but with a shower; this is typical of the ground floor of certain houses in Montevideo, where the main bath is on the top floor. When I had finished washing, someone banged on the door and told me to turn my back to it. A guard came in, blindfolded me and took me out.

When they tried to handcuff me, they saw the state of my infected wrist and became alarmed. They called a man who appeared to have some medical knowledge. He opened the wound with a razor blade, disinfected and bandaged it, leaving me without handcuffs. Then they gave me a cup of hot milk, made me sit down in a chair, covered me with the same blanket as in the car, and told me to sleep.

The interrogation and torture continued. I was not interrogated myself, but every night I could hear horrifying screams, in spite of the radio being turned up to full volume. They used the bath upstairs for the 'submarine' torture; they used electric shock treatment and whips—we could hear the crack of the whips followed by screams of pain. We were kept handcuffed and blindfolded all the time. Anyone surprised in conversation or trying to look under his blindfold was severely punished with thrashings and plantones (being forced to stand for long periods at a time).

On the night of 14 August we were hastily removed from this house. Still blindfolded and with our hands tied behind us, we were locked into a lorry which was escorted by cars with sirens. The journey to our new destination took between 20 and 30 minutes. When we arrived they took us into the basement. We entered a large room with a wooden floor and were divided into two groups, one against each wall. Here, Major Gavazzo informed us that we were in the hands of what he called the 'special security forces' of the Republic of Uruguay, that we were going to be subjected to tough measures and any short-scomings would be severely punished.

At this stage they gave us numbers for purposes of identification. There were 24 of us in all; I was number 24. As there were only four mattresses in the room, most had to sleep on the floor, covered with a blanket. The interrogation and torture was resumed: thrashings, electric shocks, and the 'submarine', for which they had a special room fitted with half a petrol tank. This was called the 'boiler room'. The ill-treatment went on until about 23 August, after which we were only punished for misbehaviour.

On 15 August, José Félix Diaz Berdayes was removed from the room which served as a common cell. Laura Anzalone, his girl friend who was pregnant, was taken away five days later. They were put in another room in the basement and allowed to walk around without handcuffs or blindfolds.

On 26 August - I remember this well as it was the day following a historic date for Uruguay and several of the guards talked about the military parade that was taking place-Major Gavazzo returned, made us stand up, and told us that they had rescued us from Argentinian assassins and that we had to help justify our presence in Uruguay by simulating an attempt at an armed invasion by a guerrilla group. The story was that we had entered the country clandestinely and had been surprised by Uruguayan troops. If we confessed, we would receive prison sentences of between 15 and 30 years. They reminded us that they had saved our lives, that we were completely in their power, and that nobody knew our whereabouts. To maintain absolute secrecy we would have to select our defence counsel from among the 'officials', thus avoiding the presence of lawyers.

We all rejected this plan and refused to sign the declarations which Major Gavazzo had brought with him. He went away, but returned the following night, calling out Raúl Altuna and his wife Margarita Michelini by name; he told them he was going to kill them with his own hands as they were responsible for the attitude of the whole group and were making fun of the 'special security forces'. He removed them from the room, and this produced enormous tension. Edelweiss Zahn de Andrés was extremely upset, while some of the women burst into tears. Altuna and his wife were brought back after several hours, having been most cruelly tortured.

Major Gavazzo came again on 1 September, this time with a better plan. Our arrest, instead of taking place while attempting to enter the country, was to occur in a house in the centre of Montevideo, where they would surprise us in a meeting, heavily armed. If we refused to cooperate, they would have no choice but to send us back to Argentina to be killed. In spite of this threat, all those kidnapped again refused to sign the required declarations.

On the following night, Major Gavazzo returned once more, accompanied by soldiers armed with machine guns; if we refused to sign, he would give them the order to open fire. He told us that the soldiers obeyed him blindly and that since nobody knew where we were, all they had

to do was to wash away the blood and cover up the marks on the wall and nobody would find out what had become of us. Nevertheless, we still refused to sign.

Several days went by, Major Gavazzo did not put in an appearance and we were left alone. Some of the people with me were called out separately to speak with officials. I could tell by what they said that 'they were trying to find a solution' to our case.

On the night of 10 September they took me to a room in which there were several people. Major Gavazzo explained that they were well on the way to reaching what he called 'an agreement' satisfactory for all concerned and he wanted to know my position. This was the first time that anybody had spoken to me about my situation since my return to Uruguay. I think that by this time everybody knew that I didn't belong to any political organisation; nobody had accused me of this and there was no proof of my relations, however indirect, with any such body. Yet for two months they had maltreated me, tortured me, kept me handcuffed and blindfolded; I had eaten badly, slept on the floor covered with just a filthy blanket and had no news about my family, who in turn must have thought me dead-all this without being accused of any crime. I had no prison record of any kind, yet they had kidnapped me and forcibly brought me back to Uruguay because I had been in Buenos Aires looking for my son who had disappeared. All my documents were in order and I wasn't violating the constitution or any laws. I told Major Gavazzo that I was opposed to the politics of the military who governed Uruguay and that I didn't agree with their economic policy or their methods, but that I didn't belong to any political group, let alone one that was conspiring against or attacking the country's institutions. Nevertheless, if what he called the 'agreement' was approved by the others, I would go along with the general consensus of opinion. After this, they took me back to our room.

During the next few days they kept calling out people from the group. Finally, on 25 September, I was brought before Major Gavazzo again. This time he spoke in a restrained manner, informing me that he had finalised the 'agreement'. I asked if my blindfold could be removed,

to which he agreed. I could now see the faces of the officials in the room, as well as one of the kidnapped people who was there.

According to Gavazzo, of the 22 people who remained in the common cell, two (Jorge Gonzáles Cardozo and Elizabeth Pérez Lutz) were classified as former members of the Tupamaros. The former had been detained between 1973 and 1975, and the latter's brother had been killed by the Army in 1972. A solution would be found to separate them from the rest. Six of the remaining 20 were 'notorious cases' for political and personal reasons: my son, Enrique Rodriguez Larreta; his wife, Raquel Nogueira Paullier; Raúl Altuna; his wife, Margarita

Michelini; Eduardo Dean Bermúdez; and myself. All six of us must publish statements in the Montevideo newspapers saying that we had returned to Uruguay of our own volition and that we were not involved in any political activity. We would then remain in detention for not more than two years, in the same house and in good conditions, which would include visits from relatives outside the place of detention in the presence of guards. Of the remaining 14, five were considered the most politically active - Sergio López Burgos, Asilú Maceiro, Ana Inés Quadros, Elba Rama Molla, and Sara Rita Méndez, mother of a boy born 20 days before her abduction; she had had no news of the baby since he had been snatched from her arms on arrest. These people would be charged with 'subversive association'. To justify this, they must feign an armed meeting, in the middle of which they would be apprehended by the Army. The remaining nine would appear to have been arrested in hotels in the centre of Montevideo (where they would be registered with false documents) while preparing a campaign to bring the governments of Argentina and Uruguay into international disrepute. They would be tried for 'assisting subversive association'. As a basic condition, all the accused must select military defence counsel, excluding any civilian lawyers. For my part, I refused to give a definite reply, pointing out that the proposal Major Gavazzo was making me was nonsensical. He took me back to the cell.

In the course of the next few days the negotiations continued. The people with me refused to accept any arms; none of them had ever seen any, let alone used them. Nevertheless, Gavazzo insisted, because the discovery of arms was essential to give wide publicity to the arrest of the 'subversive group'. Finally, it was agreed that the arms would be 'discovered', but that it would be stated that the people detained at the fictitious meeting did not know about them and had nothing to do with them. Days later, when we listened to the official communiqué transmitted by Uruguayan radio and television, I noticed that Gavazzo, who drew up the communiqué and read it, had respected this condition and in one paragraph absolved those detained from all responsibility for the arms 'found' there.

In the middle of September, Alvaro Nores Montedónica was brought from Buenos Aires. He was the brother of Maria del Pilar Nores Montedónica, a Uruguayan refugee who had also

been kidnapped in the Argentinian capital and who had travelled with us, but in different conditions. She was never handcuffed or blindfolded and could move freely from the cell. Her brother was now held in the same conditions as her.

Around 20 October, the Captain with the number 306 told us that he had acquired, presumably under a false name, a chalet at Shangri-lá, a seaside resort near Montevideo, where the 'subversives' were to be arrested. On 23 October he

came back and around 10 a.m. led away Sergio López Burgos, Asilú Maceiro, Ana Inés Quadros, Sara Rita Méndez and Elba Rama, guarded by soldiers. He returned late in the afternoon and told us they had put on a comedy in which the Army surrounded the chalet at about 3 o'clock and detained, handcuffed and hooded the five people. In addition, to impress the watching neighbours, they had arrested Captain 306 and the guards.

According to the communiqué broadcast that evening, the other nine were detained in hotels in the centre of Montevideo and would be charged with 'assisting subversive association'. These people never left our cell—those who registered in the hotels under false documents were military policewomen and soldiers from Division 300. The false papers were drawn up by the officials of the Division in the house where we were detained.

On 26 October, the 14 kidnapped people were taken by lorry to the Shangri-lá chalet. The press had been invited, and the detainees were shown to journalists. On their return to the house, we noticed that the guards treated us differently. We were all allowed to take our blindfolds off and talk to each other. In the days that followed we were even allowed to get some fresh air in the patio at the back of the house. Several high buildings in the immediate vicinity confirmed what we had already suspected - that we were being detained in the headquarters of the Servicio de Inteligencia de Defensa, a large house in the middle of a garden, right in the centre of Montevideo. The address is 1488 Bulevar Artigas, between Palmar Street and Dr Ramón Street.

On the 28, 29 and 30 October, the Armed Forces issued a communiqué over the radio, on television, and in the newspapers, which we were not allowed to listen to. It said that they were

aware of the existence of a 'subversive movement' and had detained 62 people, though they only gave the names of the 14 who had been exhibited to the press. They mentioned the names of Gerardo Gatti and León Duarte among the leaders of the PVP, but gave no information about their detention.

The 14 whose arrest had been reported were taken before a military judge and tried for the agreed crimes. They all selected military defence counsel, even Mónica Solino and Inés Quadros, whose fathers are lawyers. At this stage of the proceedings we realised that our position had improved considerably: there were enough witnesses to our arrests, so we rejected Major Gavazzo's renewed attempts to obtain signatures. Actually, he was not very insistent, telling us that 'the generals' didn't want any publicity and we were therefore going to be tried immediately. He said that my son, Margarita Michelini and Raúl Altuna would be tried for 'subversive association', my daughter-in-law, Eduardo Dean and I for 'assisting association'. I pointed out that

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I had never committed any crime and said I refused to be judged arbitrarily. I also wanted to choose my own defence counsel. A few days later the Major informed me that he had obtained my freedom without any trial.

The other five would have to sign declarations stating that they had been detained on 26 October in the airport at Carrasco, on arrival from Buenos Aires with false documents to indulge in propaganda against the Uruguayan government. They had to choose military defence counsel.

On 29 November the 14 were tried in the first instance and taken to military prisons - the men to Libertad, the women to Punta de Rieles.

In the first days of December, all those who had not been tried were taken before a military investigating magistrate. Gavazzo had arrived at an 'understanding' with Jorge Gonzáles Cardozo, who would be tried for 'assisting subversive association', and Elizabeth Pérez Lutz, who was to be released. The two were under the protection of the UNHCR in Buenos Aires; they had been accepted as refugees by the Dutch government and were to have gone to Holland at the end of June 1976:

On 12 December, Elizabeth Pérez Lutz was released. On 16 December Jorge Gonzáles Cardozo was taken to the *Libertad* prison. On the same day, the five remaining people were tried by a military judge for the agreed crimes. In the afternoon, Margarita Michelini and Raúl Altuna were taken by Major Gavazzo to visit her mother. It was only then that she learned that her daughter and son-in-law were still alive.

On 22 December, Margarita Michelini and Raquel Nogueira were taken to *Punta de Rieles*. My son, Enrique Rodriguez Larreta, Raúl Altuna, and Eduardo Dean were taken to *Libertad*.

Hours later I was released and driven to my home in a military vehicle. They also released José Félix Diaz, Laura Anzalone, Maria del Pilar Nores, and Alvaro Nores. No information was ever given to the press concerning any of them. Once released, I decided to discover the exact location of the house where we had been detained. I found out that my description coincided with that of a house in Rambla Costanera in the Punto Gordo district of Montevideo, next to the Hotel Oceania, which had become notorious as a centre where the Army interrogated and tortured people. I was told that, among others, many members of the Communist Party had been interrogated there. When I passed by the place, it looked exactly like the house in which I had been detained.

When I decided to leave Uruguay to testify to what I had experienced, I travelled to Buenos Aires. There, I made contact with Uruguayan refugees, who informed me that my description tallied with that given by an Argentinian couple who had succeeded in escaping from the place of detention, which was situated in Venancio Flores Street on the corner of Emilio Lamarca. I went to the house, now apparently abandoned, and I believe that this is the place where I was detained. It is an old workshop with a sign Automotores Orletti on the front. In Bacacay Street, which runs parallel to Emilio Lamarca, there is a school called Señor Fernández. On the corner there is a car workshop which is still in operation, and opposite Automotores Orletti there is a railway line.

After I was released I learned that during September many Uruguayan refugees had disappeared in Buenos Aires, including three young children kidnapped with their parents. As in the cases of Gatti, Duarte and Méndez, there has been no news of them to date.

I consider myself morally obliged to denounce all the things of which I was a victim and which I witnessed. Everything I have said is absolutely true and there is definite proof. If the Argentinian or Uruguayan military authorities deny these happenings, I am ready to confront them in court and challenge them to allow an international commission of investigation to go to the places where I was detained and to interview the people who were there with me.