

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 1982

ARGENTINA'S FALKLAND ISLANDS ADVENTURE

--GALTIERI IN THE SADDLE BUT INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION CERTAIN TO ENSUE

--ARGENTINE INVASION AN ADVENTURE AIMED AT CHECKING HEIGHTENED DISSENT AND DEMANDS FOR ACCOUNTING FOR DISAPPEARED

Argentina's military rulers may be presently jubilant over their relatively easy seizure of the South Atlantic Falkland Islands, but the invasion contains the potential of backfiring on its architects. Argentine commandos occupied the capital of Stanley and encountered no opposition from the small British military contingent garrisoned there. Argentine Gen. Mario Benjamin Menendez has been designated the governor of the newly annexed territory.

Argentina has long claimed the Falkland Islands, which have been controlled by the British since 1832.

The Argentine junta apparently concluded that the time was ripe for an irredentist war, or at least to invite the possibility, against Great Britain to divert increasing domestic clamor over a disastrously worsening economic situation in the country and growing political dissent. But underlying its decision to move against its old nemesis, Great Britain, is the strong possibility that the Falklands lie astride potentially rich oil beds.

A 1975 U.S. geological survey estimated that the region may contain estimated oil reserves nine times that of the fabulous North Sea discovery. To safeguard their stake in this possible bonanza, the British reached an agreement with Argentina in 1977 which provided for joint exploration of the potential reserves.

On March 31, more than 2,000 Argentines participated in a four-city demonstration protesting the harsh economic austerity program promoted by recently installed President Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri. It was the largest public protest witnessed by Argentina since the military took power in March 1976. More than 400 people were detained, and at least six people were wounded when policemen fired on a crowd in the city of Mendoza.

There has also been mounting pressure on the government for an ac-

counting of the more than 15,000 Argentines who are believed to have been "disappeared" and murdered in the "dirty war" the armed forces conducted against those who opposed their rule from 1976 to 1980. Admiral Emilio Massera, a former member of the original junta, has repeatedly called for such an accounting and consequently has been placed under house arrest on several occasions. Although the military recently pledged to determine the whereabouts of the "desaparecidos," most observers expect that it will be little more than a cosmetic effort. Every level of the armed forces played a role in the repression and there are few officers who have any enthusiasm for turning against their guilty colleagues.

Argentina's foreign adventure may distract its economically strapped population for the time being, but the armed forces will no longer be able to arouse nationalistic passions by chanting the slogan, "Las Malvinas Son Nuestras!" The Argentine name for the islands is Malvinas.

Moreover, the armed invasion will further contribute to Argentina's international status as a nation with a pariah regime. No matter how legitimate its territorial claims might be, its decision to forgo negotiations in favor of armed intervention can add little to its case that its human rights record has been vastly distorted by the foreign press.

The historical antecedents to the dispute add little weight to Argentina's case. British navigators originally visited the islands in 1592 but the French were the first to colonize them. In 1766, France ceded its rights to Spain, an action contested by Britain the following year. A British settlement was established but it was abandoned several years later. The islands remained uninhabited for the next half-century until newly-independent Argentina moved a military force into the area in 1820. Great Britain reasserted its claim in 1830 and expelled the Argentine unit. Since 1832 the islands have been under complete British control.

The British capitulation today follows a week-long series of naval maneuvers which grew out of an incident March 19 at Leigh Bay on St. Peter's island, one part of the 200 mile long archipelago. After 39 Argentines arrived to dismantle a whaling station, the British protested that the group had failed to comply with proper customs procedures and illegally raised an Argentine flag. The lightly armed Antarctic exploration vessel H.M.S. Endurance, with 36 marines aboard, was dispatched to the island.

The Argentines responded by sending two guided missile corvettes, the Drummond and the Grandville, as well as the Bahia Paraiso. Its only aircraft carrier was sent steaming through the area and the Mar del Plata and Belgrano naval bases were placed on full alert.

At least one wire service reported that the British government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had authorized the use of force against Argentina but the nearest British frigate was thousands of miles away in the Caribbean. Thatcher has been attacked by Tory back-benchers and members of the opposition Labor and Social Democrat parties for weakening British military preparedness. Ironically, it was Great Britain which sold Argentina the aircraft carrier, as well as other ships in its fleet.

Thatcher's actions against Argentina come late in the day. Her Latin American relations have been precisely tuned to those of the Reagan administration. Relations have been warmed up with the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and unlike every other member of NATO, Great Britain has given its enthusiastic backing to Washington's policy in El Salvador, including being the only European nation to have sent official observers to witness the March 28 elections.

The United Nations Security Council has gone into emergency session at the request of the British government. However, any Security Council resolution condemning Argentina's action is sure to be vetoed by the Soviet Union. Argentina's fiercely anti-communist military rulers have developed close commercial ties with Moscow, and the Soviet Union now buys the lion's share of its grain exports.

Ultimately, the real losers in the whole affair will be the 1,800 inhabitants of the islands. Engaged primarily in fishing and shepherding, the hardy Falklanders are almost entirely of Welsh descent and have no wish to live under Argentine rule. Repeated petitions to London calling for continued British sovereignty have been signed by virtually every adult member of the islands. Most of the Falklanders will now probably emigrate to either Britain, New Zealand or Australia, leaving a once prosperous colony in ruins.