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Argentina shaken to the core by army admission of guilt

□ The army confessed that it tortured and killed leftists and political dissidents two decades ago.

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — For years Argentines were told not to dwell on the horrors of the "Dirty War." Now, the official silence has been broken with the frank admission that the army tortured and killed leftists and political dissidents two decades ago.

The truth has shaken the country to the core. While it may help Argentines confront their past, it may not help President Carlos Menem, who pardoned many of the people responsible and is up for re-election.

"It's time to assume the responsibility and no longer deny the horrors of the past," army Commander Gen. Martin Balza said Tuesday in acknowledging the army's role in the former military government's brutal campaign.

"The army did not know how

to take on terrorists by legal means" Balza said on a televised talk show. "(It) employed illegitimate methods, including the suppression of life, to obtain information."

His surprise statement was applauded Wednesday by human rights groups, which have pushed for a new investigation into the "disappearance" of thousands of people during the Dirty War.

It came on the heels of two chilling confessions by retired armed forces officers who said political prisoners were thrown alive into the Atlantic from navy and army aircraft in the 1970s.

The military junta that seized power in 1976 went after left-wing guerrillas who sought to destabilize the country. More than 9,000 people, many of them intellectuals and dissidents unconnected with terrorism, were arrested and disappeared, an official report says.

Human rights advocates claim more than 30,000 Argentines disappeared under military rule.

Menem, who had repeatedly urged former repressors "not to rub salt in old wounds" by publicly confessing to atrocities,

praised Balza's "courage" and said he expected statements from the air force and navy.

He said he hoped Balza's admission would pacify the public and put an end to further revelations of torture by repentant officers.

"This is a relief because on the one hand it will encourage confessions from repentant military men and also because it will be able to speak more openly," Menem said.

In a newspaper published Monday, former army officer Victor Ibanez claimed political prisoners were put on "death flights" between 1976 and 1978. He was the first member of the military to speak openly about the alleged military murder.

The account echoed a confession in March by a former officer, Lt. Cmdr. Adolfo Scilingo. He, too, described how prisoners were drugged and thrown from navy planes.

Human rights groups agreed with Menem. During the Dirty War, they said, now hopefully will gather and lead to a shake-up of the country's discredited forces, they said.

Firefighter who rescued Jessica McClure

□ Robert O'Donnell wrote a suicide note and apparently shot himself in a pasture near Stanton.

STANTON, Texas (AP) — The world waited in 1987 as paramedic Robert O'Donnell shimmied on his back through a shaft to dislodge a Midland toddler wedged down a well.

More than seven years later, the first rescuer to reach Jessica McClure wrote a suicide note and drove to a pasture near Stanton before apparently shooting himself. Autopsy results were pending.

Glasscock County Deputy Sheriff Fred Schroyer told The Dallas Morning News that O'Donnell apparently took his own life.

"Ever since that Jessica deal, his life fell apart," brother Ricky O'Donnell said Wednesday.

Ricky O'Donnell said the body of the 37-year-old ex-firefighter was found Monday morning on their parents' ranch near Stanton, about 20 miles

northeast of Midland. He said people often asked his brother the ordeal of helping save an 18-month-old girl from a narrow pit.

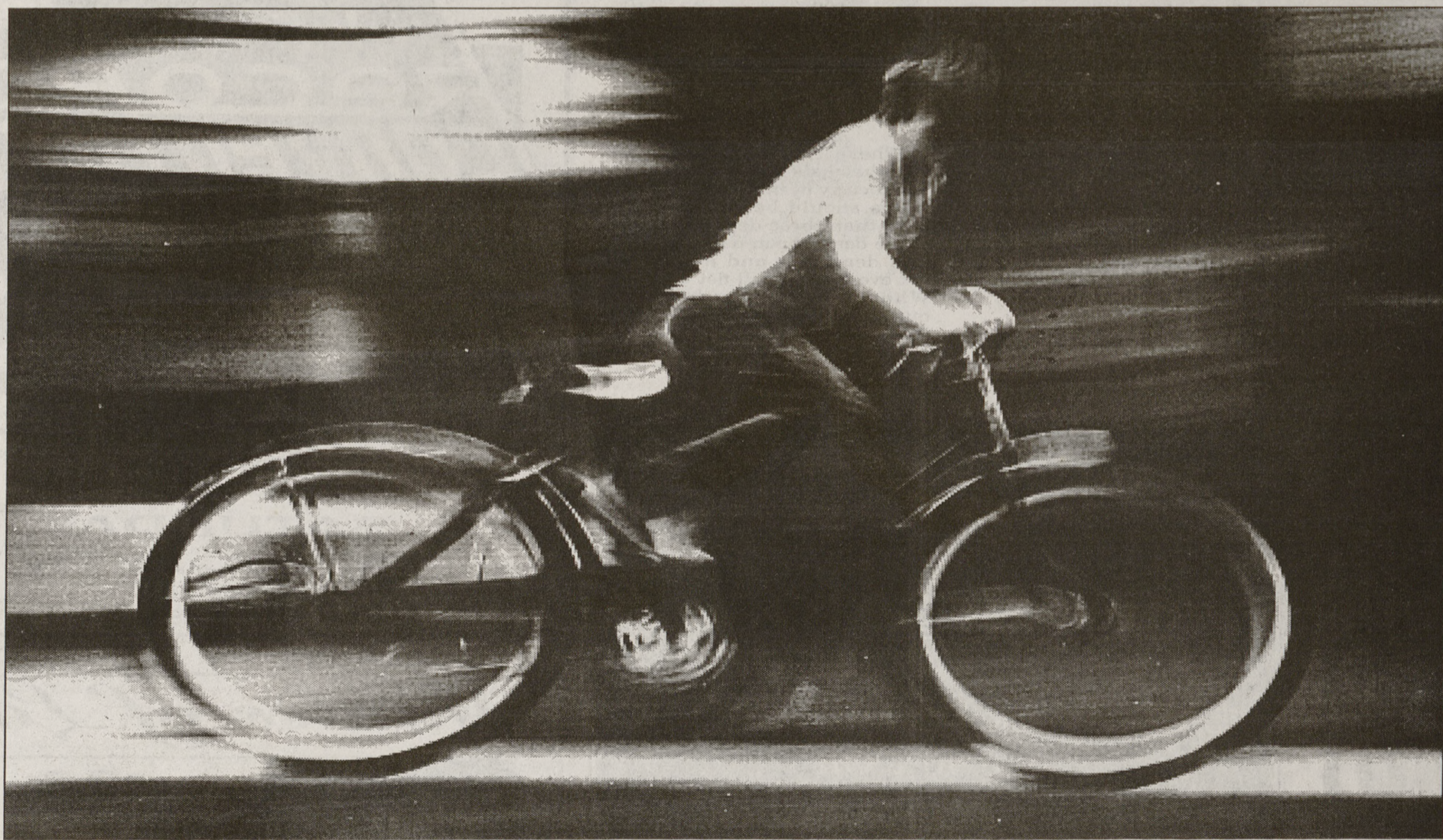
Robert O'Donnell and others toiled for 10 hours to reach Jessica, who fell 22 feet down a well in her aunt's back yard in Stanton.

Television viewers tuned in nationwide to see the rescue. News clippings say O'Donnell's slight build made him the one to descend a newly drilled shaft.

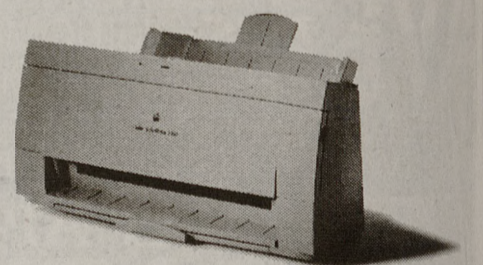
He went down once but decided the shaft wasn't wide enough to pull the girl out without risking a paralyzing injury.

"I told her we would be back," O'Donnell said in 1987. "I had absolutely decided when I went in, I wasn't coming out without her."

On the second try in the widened shaft, he smeared a lubricating jelly around the hole and tugged on Jessica's dangling left leg. He prayed and cursed; the girl told him "No" several times as he pulled.



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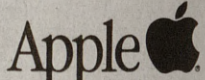


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