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Obama: US slow to speak out for human rights in Argentina



President Barack Obama and Argentine President Mauricio Macri, right, listen to Marcleo Brodsky at Parque de la Memoria (Remembrance Park) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Thursday, March 24, 2016.

March 26, 2016

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — As many Argentines paused to remember loved ones killed during their country's brutal dictatorship, President Barack Obama said Thursday that America was slow to speak out for human rights during that painful period and promised an honest accounting going forward.

Obama's comments, sure to reverberate in Argentina and beyond, came 40 years to the day that a 1976 coup opened a period of military rule in Argentina that continues to have repercussions today.

Obama paid tribute to the victims of Argentina's "Dirty War" by visiting Remembrance Park and tossing a wreath into the Rio de La Plata river near a memorial bearing thousands of names.

"We've been slow to speak out for human rights and that was the case here," said Obama, standing alongside Argentina's new president, Mauricio Macri.

Obama said it takes courage for a society to address "uncomfortable truths" about its past, but that doing so is essential to moving forward.

Prominent human rights groups shunned an invitation to attend, arguing that the presence of an American president on such an important date was disrespectful to the thousands who died.

Nora Cortinas of the iconic Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo group called Obama "a representative of death."

"What would victims say if they saw (us) hugging and paying homage to a president from a country responsible for state terrorism?" she told a local radio station hours before the event.

The anniversary is always a sensitive time for the nation of 41 million, as many families are still searching for the remains of loved ones who disappeared and are presumed dead. Even decades later, the dictatorship is a topic of national importance. It shapes mainstream political ideologies and spawns debates over whether the government should continue to try perpetrators so many years later or spend millions on searching for remains.

Obama said his administration will endeavor to make amends by declassifying even more documents that could shed light on what role the U.S. may have played in one of the region's most repressive dictatorships. The release likely will come after Obama leaves office next year.

Thousands of State Department documents were declassified in 2002, but they don't paint a full picture of what the U.S. knew or its possible role in bloodshed. The most suggestive document is a series of notes from a late 1976 meeting between Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Argentina's foreign minister.

"If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly," Kissinger said, according to a transcript, suggesting an implicit green-lighting of a clampdown on dissidents.

The new classification, which the Obama administration first announced last week, will include military and intelligence papers for the first time. Human rights groups have long demanded those documents, and historians say they could include grisly accounts of abuses and possibly more information about a U.S. role.

Rights groups believe U.S. backing for authoritarian regimes in Latin America extended to Argentina during the 1976 to 1983 period known as the "Dirty War."

Some 13,000 people were killed or disappeared during the brutal rule of "the generals," according to government estimates. Rights groups put the number closer to 30,000.

Yet even Obama's promise of a full accounting hasn't quelled concerns. As Obama met with Macri on Wednesday, protesters gathered in Buenos Aires to express anger at his visit. A large march also was planned Thursday afternoon to commemorate the 40th anniversary.

Protests and a commemorative march were also planned for late Thursday in Bariloche, a picturesque city in southern Argentina where Obama spent the afternoon with his family before returning to Washington.

Macri thanked Obama for visiting "on this very special day for us" and called for a renewed commitment to democracy and human rights.

"Every day, somewhere in the world, they are jeopardized," he said in Spanish.

The son of one of Argentina's richest businessmen, Macri has been criticized for being impervious to the need for U.S. accountability as he pursues closer ties with Washington. He declined Wednesday to say what he expects the new records will reveal.

Macri's decision to pursue such a document dump could help him politically as he enacts many unpopular changes, like cutting subsidies for the poor, which are in line with the reforms that have put him in America's good graces.