

Bonafini defies judge's arrest warrant

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Supporters rally in streets to prevent detention of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo president.

In dramatic scenes played out yesterday afternoon and evening on the streets of the capital, the president of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Hebe de Bonafini defiantly challenged a court order demanding she testify in the ongoing Sueños Compartidos ("Shared dreams") case investigating alleged corruption.

Rallying thousands of supporters to her side, who prevented police officers from detaining her, Bonafini refused to submit to questioning about the alleged embezzlement of public funds, ignoring the judge's warrant.

Last month, Judge Marcelo Martínez de Giorgi summoned Bonafini, 87, to court for questioning as part of the probe into the Sueños Compartidos housing project. The human rights leader was due to testify yesterday morning. However, after refusing to attend the scheduled hearing, Bonafini announced her defiance of the order and instead rushed to Plaza de Mayo, where she and other members of the Mothers have demonstrated every Thursday afternoon for over three decades to push the government to locate children who went missing under the last military dictatorship.

Bonafini, the mother of two children who were disappeared, says the investigation is politically motivated.

"If they want to take me to jail, let them come. You cannot jail freedom of thought. We have nothing to hide," Bonafini said, addressing the growing crowds of supporters who massed to Plaza de Mayo in a spontaneous display of solidarity with the human rights leader.

After she publicly refused to testify, De Giorgi declared her in contempt of court and ordered police forces in the City to detain her, by force if necessary.

Following the court order, police attempted to enter the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo headquarters near the Congress building on Avenida de Mayo and surrounded the Plaza de Mayo, but were impeded by supporters of Bonafini and the organization who, throughout the afternoon, surrounded Bonafini and the other Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, linking arms in a defensive wall.

Later in the day, police sources announced that Bonafini would not be detained that day, but added that her arrest would nonetheless take place "at an opportune moment."

Human shields

After the rally in Plaza de Mayo, Bonafini and the other Mothers headed back down Avenida de Mayo and towards the organization's headquarters, surrounded by growing ranks of supporters from left-wing and Peronist groups and human rights activists.

A second, larger rally was held outside the organization's headquarters, where hundreds of supporters chanted in support of Bonafini. Many criticized both the judiciary and President Mauricio Macri's government, chanting: "Macri, you trash! You are the dictatorship!"

Having retreated briefly into organization's headquarters, Bonafini emerged to cheers and called on Macri directly to end what she implied was political persecution against the human rights group.

"Macri, back off," she said, adding that she would "continue our unwavering position, that nothing will prevent us from progressing."

"We will not be sad, afflicted, silent or still. The mobilization of the people is what makes us free," she added. "You don't mess with these old women."

High-profile political figures, including former ministers from the government of former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, gathered on Avenida de Mayo and offered their support. Former vice-president Armado Boudou, CTA umbrella union leader Hugo Yasky and former Economy minister Axel Kicillof were among those present.

"This is shameful. This is a provocation," Kicillof said to cheers in reference to De Giorgi's decision to call for Bonafini's arrest. He was joined by a multitude of prominent political figures challenging the attempt to detain the rights leader.

"They have ordered the arrest of Hebe on a Thursday. But we are already at the Plaza, together with the Mothers as always," Yasky wrote on Twitter.

"Everyone knows our strong disagreements with Hebe de Bonafini, but it is unacceptable for the justice system to attack the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo," said Workers' Leftist Front (FIT) lawmaker Nicolás del Caño.

Others, such as Radical (UCR) lawmaker Luis Petri — a government ally — called on Bonafini to testify.

"She must answer questions before the court," he posted on Twitter.

The case

Bonafini helped coordinate the Sueños Compartidos organization as part of her role as president of Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, who helped sponsor the programme.

During his investigation, Martínez de Giorgi has said that he found many "irregularities" in the way the housing projects undertaken by the programme were financed, claiming that 206 million pesos of the total 748 million pesos transferred by the previous Victory Front (FpV) government to the foundation were missing.

Bonafini has always denied any wrongdoing in the case and has accused brothers and accountants Sergio and Pablo Schoklender of being responsible for the misuse of housing funds. The brothers — notorious for carrying out the double homicides of their parents in 1981 — are the main suspects in the case. Sergio Shocklender was the financial manager for the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo Foundation but was kicked off amid accusations that he had "betrayed" Bonafini and the other Mothers.

Over 40 people including various former government ministers have been summoned by De Giorgi for questioning in the case alongside Bonafini. Among them were former Federal Planning minister Julio de Vido, former Public Works secretary José López (arrested in June when trying to hide millions of dollars in cash) and former Public Works under-secretary Abel Fatała. Martínez de Giorgi has also summoned Santa Fe Governor Miguel Lifschitz and Misiones provincial leader Maurice Closs.

