ARGENTINA: UPDATE 1-U.S. to "do its best" on Dirty War documents.
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BUENOS AIRES, Aug 16 (Reuters) - The U.S. State Department on Wednesday promised Argentines who lost relatives under the military dictatorship of 1976-1983 that it would do its best to release secret documents from U.S. archives.

"I will do what I can in terms of getting documents declassified that have to do with Argentina," U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright told a news conference after talks with Argentine Foreign Minister Adalberto Rodriguez Giavarini.

At a meeting with Albright on Wednesday morning, the grandmothers of Argentine victims asked what the United States had done since they first asked for the documents last year.

Estela Carlotto, head of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, which tracks down children stolen from women held and killed in the military dictatorship, went into the meeting vowing to lobby for Washington to open its files.

When she emerged, Carlotto said Albright had commented that "the issue of the disappeared is very sad."

At the news conference later, Albright gave a firmer promise. "I will do what I can to be of assistance because this is an issue of humanitarian (concern) as well as conscience that I think we need to deal with," she said.

"The United States wants to be as cooperative and helpful as possible in trying to understand better what happened in a series of tragic situations," she added.

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A senior U.S. official later told reporters that the people at the meeting were particularly interested in documents on children taken from imprisoned women and allegedly given to the families of military officers to bring up.

Seventy-eight such children have been tracked down but the grandmothers say the total should be about 500, he said.

Other documents cover "the Condor project," a concerted campaign by South American dictatorships in the 1970s to wipe out their leftist opponents.

Albright told them they should look first in the National Security Archives, a private group which stores declassified documents. The official said it was unlikely the United States would have collected information on such children.

Albright told the news conference the State Department had already released thousands of pages on similar military repression in Chile under General Augusto Pinochet.

She noted, however, that the State Department did not control all the U.S. archives. Others are in the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon or the White House.

A senior U.S. official said the State Department was already "maxed out" with work on declassifying documents on Chile. When this work is complete in September, it will be able to consider moving on to other collections, he added.

One group of mothers of Argentine victims did not take part in the meeting with Albright. Hebe de Bonafini, the leader of a hardline group of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, seeking the truth about the fate of relatives who "disappeared", said: "Her visit is hypocritical and it disgusts me that other (human rights) groups should pay attention to such a sinister character."

"Not only are we not going to any meeting with her, but we reject her presence here," De Bonafini told reporters.

Many human rights groups in Latin America are still critical of the United States for its support of dictators like Pinochet in the 1970s. The U.S. policy at the time was part of its Cold War against Soviet influence in the Americas.

Argentine human rights groups estimate that 30,000 people died or disappeared in the military's "Dirty War" against leftists. Official records list 15,000 victims.

The Clinton administration, despite its liberal credentials, has been reluctant to admit mistakes by previous Cold War administrations. U.S. officials also want to protect living Americans who knew about and may have encouraged military repression of leftists in South America.